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# PHILIP NERI AND CHARLES BORROMEO AS MODELS OF CATHOLIC REFORM

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ABSTRACT In the face of the external challenge of the Protestant Reformation, as well as the internal threat of spiritual, moral, and disciplinary corruption, two Catholic saints worked tirelessly to reform the Church in different but complementary ways. Philip Neri (1515–95) and Charles Borromeo (1538–84) led the Catholic Counter–Reformation during the middle–to–late sixteenth century, placing their distinctive gifts at the service of the Church. Philip Neri used his personal humility, intelligence, and charisma to attract the people of Rome to Christ, while Charles Borromeo employed his gifts for administration and his experience as a top aide to the pope to promote needed institutional reform. Both men achieved great personal holiness and moved others to holiness of life. It is their response to and sharing of the 'universal call to holiness', then, that constitutes the core of both of their approaches to ecclesial reform. Their focus on holiness, expressed in an emphasis on either the 'charismatic' or 'hierarchical' dimensions of the Church's life, also provides a model for today's Church, scarred as she is by scandal and in need of a new movement of reform.

KEYWORDS: Counter–Reformation, Philip Neri, Charles Borromeo, Ecclesial Reform, Holiness

## Introduction

The Catholic Counter–Reformation of the second–half of the sixteenth century had many important protagonists. Two of the men who did the most to advance the cause of reform on the practical level were Philip Neri (1515–95) and Charles Borromeo (1538–84). Both men were from northern Italy (Philip Neri from Florence, Charles Borromeo from Arona, near Milan) and spent a great deal of time in Rome. Both men practiced severe asceticism and achieved remarkable degrees of personal holiness. Neither of them was an accomplished theologian, but both were known for their intelligence and especially for their acute pastoral wisdom and straightforward, incisive preaching.

The personal strengths and experience of Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo aided them in the work of ecclesial reform. Their approaches were

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different but complementary. Philip was a man of deep prayer influenced by a variety of prominent religious communities, particularly the Dominicans, Benedictines, and the still–new Society of Jesus. He engaged in an apostolate to the people of Rome characterized by humility, intensive one–on–one engagement with the people he evangelized, frequent preaching in churches and on the city streets, and countless hours in the confessional. Charles, a man of severe personal discipline, culture, and administrative action, served as an important leader of the Council of Trent and its implementation. He reformed the exercise of the episcopal ministry, insisting that bishops reside in their dioceses. He also reformed religious houses and dioceses, called provincial councils and local synods, established the modern Catholic seminary system of priestly formation, and served the poor and the sick with self–sacrificing pastoral charity.

Neither Charles nor Philip was heavily involved in the theological controversies of their time, such as those centered on grace and nature, the Sacrifice of the Mass, the sacraments, or ecclesiology. Both of them thought as well as worked in the practical sphere, and were specifically devoted to their cities: Philip to Rome, and Charles to Milan. Both worked diligently, even self–sacrificially, and expected their collaborators to work very hard and with the same focus on the salvation of souls.

In their work of ecclesial reform, both Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo addressed not only the challenges posed by the Protestant Reformation, but also and perhaps even first and foremost the internal problems that plagued the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century. Even the name 'Counter–Reformation' given to the larger project of ecclesial reform at work in the Catholic Church of the second half of the sixteenth century can be somewhat deceptive, when considering figures such as Philip and Charles. The Reformation posed a considerable challenge to them, as well as to the whole Tridentine–era Catholic Church. But many problems that were at least equally serious existed *within* the Catholic Church both before and after the drama of the Reformation began in earnest.

Corruptions in clerical life, bishops who did not live in their dioceses among their flocks, widespread secularism, sexual immorality and other forms of sensuality, unbelief and the failure to live according to the Christian faith and moral doctrine—all of these and more were scourges of the age and were not the fault of the Reformation. In fact, the Reformation itself was, among other things, an attempt to right many of the wrongs that had grown like weeds in the Renaissance Church. The aim of clerics such as Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo was to remain within the communion of the Catholic Church, working for the salvation of souls. They pursued this lofty goal by becoming holy themselves, encouraging individual holiness in those they

encountered or over whom they had influence, and by either reforming and revitalizing existing forms of ecclesial life or developing new forms.

One way of conceiving of the respective approaches to reform taken by Philip and Charles is to describe Philip as operating within the *charismatic* dimension of the Church, while Charles operated more within the Church's *hierarchical* dimension. Those categories could be viewed as facile and inadequate, but they at least help give a basic sense of the distinction and complementarity of these two approaches to ecclesial reform. Philip's reforming and evangelizing activity was more highly personal, individualized, and based on the saint's own spirituality and ideas about what would help the people of Rome grow closer to Christ. As a cardinal–archbishop, Charles Borromeo worked in and through ecclesial structures, rooted his own ideas for reform in the chief hierarchical event of the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent, and viewed institutional reform as a necessary means by which to achieve the sanctification of individual Christians.

Today, the Catholic Church throughout the world is wounded by crises: clerical sex abuse, failures of leadership in handling cases of abuse, and among many a lack of confidence in the Church's hierarchy, not to mention the ever–growing threats of secularism, religious persecution of various kinds, the abandonment of Christian moral norms, and the desire of many for 'spirituality without religion'. In the face of all these existential threats from within and without, the Church stands in need of solid models of ecclesial reform. Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo provide such models, and their approach to ecclesial reform fits particularly well with the current emphases of the Catholic Church on the 'universal call to holiness' and the 'new evangelization'. These concepts, rooted in the teachings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the post–conciliar magisterium of the Catholic Church, summon every Christian, clerics and laity alike, to pursue Christ–like holiness and to take up the mission of evangelization, for the sanctification of the world and the salvation of souls.

Responding to the spiritual, disciplinary, moral, and theological threats of their own time, Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo worked tirelessly to perform a most fundamental priestly act: to bring Christ to their people, and to bring people to Christ. They served as priestly mediators according to the gifts with which God had blessed each of them, and kept in view the twin goals of holiness and salvation. Neither man tried to save the Catholic Church as an institution merely for its own sake. Both were concerned with the health of the Church as the Body of Christ, Head and members, here on earth and the instrument of salvation for God's people. To put the matter most simply, both Philip and Charles loved Jesus Christ, loved his Church, and loved the people they served, because both of these men of God knew their people to be redeemed and loved by Christ.

## Philip Neri's Apostolate to Rome

> 'He will not contend or cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory' (Matthew 12:19–20).

In these troubled days of crisis and scandal, Catholics have come to see that the Church is populated by many a 'bruised reed' and many a 'smoldering wick'. The wounded faithful seem to be everywhere.

At its root, the word 'crisis' indicates a moment of decision, a moment of critical importance.

All Catholics today face a life–shaping decision about how to respond to the seemingly endless stream of reports of sexual abuse and failed handling of sexual abuse cases by Church leaders that we have encountered these past several months.

The decision is a stark one, between hope and despair, persevering fidelity and betrayal, between remaining with Christ and abandoning him. But even among those who choose to remain with Christ, there is another decision to be made, between the pursuit of ecclesial revolution or reform.

Most Catholics have a visceral reaction against the word 'revolution'. They know that revolutionary change is foreign to the Church's constitution and lived tradition. And yet there is a kind of revolutionary spirit that can take hold of any zealous Catholic who faces highly destructive forms of evil such as we are currently witnessing. To seek to effect dramatic and immediate change is a natural instinct for those who wish to protect the Church they love. It is easy to cross the line between reform and revolution.

Keeping in mind the supreme priority of the salvation of souls—a priority articulated in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, among other sources—those who seek to help the Church must give first consideration to what will help those people most threatened to avoid hell and go to heaven. This consideration means, among other things, that reed–breaking and wick–quenching must be avoided. While reform heals and edifies not only ecclesial structures, but also people, revolution tends to do a great deal of damage along with achieving some measure of good.

Blessed John Henry Newman (1801–1890), the recent papal approval of whose second miracle has paved the way for his imminent canonization, expressed his own views regarding ecclesial reform in a pair of sermons given in 1850 at the Birmingham Oratory of St. Philip Neri. The sermons were entitled, 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri'. In them, Newman spoke to his fellow oratorians about the life and ministry of their patron saint by comparing and contrasting the apostolic approach of Philip with that of another famous

Florentine priest who lived a century earlier, the Dominican Giorolamo Savonarola (1452–1498).

Savonarola lived shortly before the Protestant Reformation, while Philip's priestly ministry coincided more or less with the second half of the sixteenth century, in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation. Both of them principally faced, not the Reformation itself, but those evils within the Renaissance–era Church against which the Protestants reacted. Though for a Catholic nothing justifies breaking communion with Rome, it was nevertheless a time of widespread decadence, sin, and godlessness in the Church. And two godly men confronted these evils in very different ways.

*Evil in the Renaissance Church*

Although it makes for a long quotation, Newman's description of the situation of the Church at this time is too perfect to paraphrase. The haunting picture Newman draws for his hearers bore some poignancy for the English Catholics of his own time, but it is perhaps much more apt for describing the crisis of the Church today:

> (Philip's) times were such as the Church has never seen before nor since, and such as the world must last long for her to see again; nor peculiar only in themselves, but involving a singular and most severe trial of the faith and love of her children. It was a time of sifting and peril, and of 'the fall and resurrection of many in Israel'. Our gracious Lord, we well know, never will forsake her; He will sustain her in all dangers, and she will last while the world lasts; but, if ever there was a time when He seemed preparing to forsake her, it was not the time of persecution, when thousands upon thousands of her choicest were cut off, and her flock decimated; it was not in the middle age, when the ferocity of the soldier and subtlety of the sophist beleaguered her,—but it was in that dreary time, at the close and in the fulness of which St. Philip entered upon his work. A great author, one of his own sons, Cardinal Baronius, has said of the dark age, that it was a time when our Lord seemed to be asleep in Peter's boat; but there is another passage of the Gospel still more wonderful than the record of that sleep, and one which had a still more marvelous accomplishment in the period of which I have to speak. There was a time when Satan took up bodily the King of Saints, and carried Him whither he would. Then was our most Holy Saviour and Lord clasped in the arms of ambition, avarice, and impurity:—and in like manner His Church also after Him, though full of divine gifts, the Immaculate Spouse, the Oracle of Truth, the Voice of the Holy Ghost, infallible in matters of faith and morals, whether in the chair of her Supreme Pontiff, or in the unity of her Episcopate, nevertheless was at this time so environed, so implicated, with sin and lawlessness, as to appear in the eyes of the world to be what she was not. Never, as then, were her rulers, some in higher, some in lower degree, so near compromising what can never be compromised; never so near denying in private what they taught in public, and undoing by their lives what they professed with their mouths; never were they so mixed up with vanity, so tempted by pride, so haunted by concupiscence; never breathed they so

> tainted an atmosphere, or were kissed by such traitorous friends, or were subjected to such sights of shame, or were clad in such blood–stained garments, as in the centuries upon and in which St. Philip came into the world. Alas, for us, my Brethren! the scandal of deeds done in Italy then is borne by us in England now (Newman 1908: 201–203).

At a time when Satan's power over so many people seemed overwhelming, it was imperative to manifest God's power in order to threat. But how best to accomplish this?

*A Fiery Apostle*

The first approach Newman describes is that of Savonarola. The Dominican priest is not a villain for Newman. Nor was he a villain in the eyes of Philip Neri, who held 'affection … for his memory', according to Newman. Savonarola eventually fell into excesses of zeal and weakness, but at first he did much that was good and did it with upright motivations.

Students of Church history know that Savonarola's approach in calling the people of Florence to repentance and conversion was characterized by loud, public denunciations of sin. Later, the Dominican added a call for the burning of problematic books and other possessions deemed morally objectionable. Newman gives a vivid account of Savonarola's apostolic zeal:

> A true son of St. Dominic, in energy, in severity of life, in contempt of merely secular learning, a forerunner of the Dominican St. Pius in boldness, in resoluteness, in zeal for the honour of the House of God, and for the restoration of holy discipline, Savonarola felt 'his spirit stirred up within him', like another Paul, when he came to that beautiful home of genius and philosophy; for he found Florence, like another Athens, 'wholly given to idolatry'. He groaned within him, and was troubled, and refused consolation, when he beheld a Christian court and people priding itself on its material greatness, its intellectual gifts, and its social refinement, while it abandoned itself to luxury, to feast and song and revel, to fine shows and splendid apparel, to an impure poetry, to a depraved and sensual character of art, to heathen speculations, and to forbidden, superstitious practices. His vehement spirit could not be restrained, and got the better of him, and—unlike the Apostle, whose prudence, gentleness, love of his kind, and human accomplishments are nowhere more happily shown than in his speech to the Athenians—he burst forth into a whirlwind of indignation and invective against all that he found in Florence, and condemned the whole established system, and all who took part of it, high and low, prince or prelate, ecclesiastic or layman, with a pitiless rigour—which for the moment certainly did a great deal more than St. Paul was able to do at the Areopagus; for St. Paul made only one or two converts there, and departed, whereas Savonarola had great immediate success, frightened and abashed the offenders, rallied round him the better disposed, and elicited and developed whatever there was of piety, whether in the multitude or in the upper class (Newman 1908: 211–212).

Savonarola's 'bold language effected for the moment a revolution rather than a reform' (Newman 1908: 214). On the one hand, his approach yielded many genuine conversions, displays of increased devotion, reforms in people's dress, artistic works, and in many penitential acts. On the other hand, these positive strides were not to last. The seeds of revolution were not deeply planted enough to stand the test of time, and eventually Savonarola himself took a spiritual turn for the worse.

> 'At length, his innocence, sincerity, and zeal were the ruin of his humility', Newman says of Savonarola, who eventually came to oppose even the pope in his excess of zeal. According to Newman, 'Reform is not wrought out by disobedience'. Savonarola eventually lost his way and his spiritual authority, and was executed by hanging and burning in the same square where he had burned all the people's belongings that he had judged to be occasions of sin (Newman 1908: 216–217).

*'The Whisper of a Gentle Air'*

Though both Savonarola and Philip Neri began their priestly labors as godly men, it is Philip whose ministry was carried–out in a more godly way. While God reveals himself to man as the God of power and might, he also shows himself to be a God of gentleness, kindness, and mercy. To cultivate and act out of these godly qualities brings about the deepest and most effective ecclesial reform. Newman writes:

> It is not by the enthusiasm of the multitude, or by political violence—it is not by powerful declamation, or by railing at authorities, that the foundations are laid of religious works. It is not by sudden popularity, or by strong resolves, and demonstrations, or by romantic incidents, or by immediate successes, that undertakings commence which are to last. I do not say, that to be roused, even for a moment, from the dream of sin, to repent and be absolved, even though a relapse follow it, is a slight gain; or that the brilliant, but brief, triumphs of Savonarola are to be despised. He did good in his day, though his day was a short one. Still, after all, his history brings to mind that passage in sacred history, where the Almighty displayed His presence to Elias on Mount Horeb. 'The Lord was not in the wind', nor 'in the earthquake', nor 'in the fire'; but after the fire came 'the whisper of a gentle air' (Newman 1908: 218).

Philip Neri was the 'whisper of a gentle air' that would produce good and lasting fruit in the city of Rome, where he served as a priest for sixty years, beginning at the age of twenty.

The late Dominican preacher exercised an important influence over the young Philip, having died fewer than twenty years before Philip was born. The memory of Savonarola was still fresh in the minds of the people of Florence. And Philip not only admired all that was good in Savonarola and in his

priestly work, but he also spent much time and was highly influenced by the Dominican Monastery of St. Mark's in Florence.

> According to Newman, three saints chiefly influenced the young Philip Neri: Benedict of Nursia, Dominic, and Ignatius of Loyola, Philip's contemporary in Rome. The combination of influences produced a potent spirituality and apostolic methodology in Philip's priesthood. He was, by temperament and decision, also a bit of an odd duck, taking an unconventional approach to ministry.

In fact, upon arriving in Rome, the saint did not launch out immediately into apostolic labors, but spent ten years praying in the Roman Catacombs. It was a most unusual monastic beginning to a priesthood that would be largely characterized by a vigorous, active apostolate. During this time, Philip prayed much and exercised a severe asceticism. In the long–term, this asceticism would build the strength needed for Philip's heroically energetic apostolate. In the immediate circumstances of these early years of monastic living, according to an early biographer, such discipline aided Philip in his pursuit of contemplative prayer:

> Besides prayer, (Philip) studied how to macerate his flesh with every sort of mortification. He slept very little, and mostly upon bare earth, and disciplined himself nearly every day with some little chains of iron. He loved poverty as his dearest companion, avoided conversation, and all recreations, even blameless ones; and, in a word, he studied how to decline everything which could bring comfort or pleasure to his body … Above all things he practiced silence, which he prized all his life long more than any other discipline, and kept to it so far as his institute allowed; and thus he attained to the contemplation of divine things (Bacci 2017: 12).

In seeking reform, Philip 'was to pursue Savonarola's purposes, but not in Savonarola's way' (Newman 1908: 224). He emphasized community life, characterized by mutual love and hard work. He engaged in regular preaching, but a kind of preaching that was more subdued and steady than Savonarola's fierier, more intense style. The daily preaching of Philip, and later of his fellow oratorians, was based upon spiritual works, the lives of the saints, and Church history. Philip's own theological outlook was heavily based upon his study of Scripture and the works of Thomas Aquinas. Although, as has been noted, he was not known as an academic, Philip was known for his wisdom and clarity of thought. In fact, if during another's discourse he heard something that was not quite accurate, he was known to approach the pulpit himself and explain the matter more precisely and clearly than the original speaker. His commitment to the truth was such that it allowed him to overcome his usual reticence in putting himself forward (Bacci 2017: 10). His

preaching was not only clear and accurate, however, but had a winning quality that produced much good spiritual fruit:

> There was no heart so hard that it was not softened by his discourses. On one occasion he converted thirty dissolute youths by a single sermon; and many of his auditors said that to hear him was enough to convince anyone of his sanctity, and his earnest desire to win souls to Christ. Some went to hear him for the very purpose of making game of him… but they even were caught by his words, and happily convinced against their own wills (Bacci 2017: 24).

Philip always possessed tremendous interior zeal. At one point, at about the age of forty, he thought of going east as a missionary, but, as Newman writes, 'his Indies were to be in Rome, where God would make much use of him' (Newman 1908: 227).

Whereas Savonarola had primarily aimed at external reform among the people of Florence, Philip worked chiefly for internal reform, sure that the external would follow—and it often did.

He insisted on interior conversion, disciplining of the faculty of reason. He encouraged frequent confession and Holy Communion, love and freedom of spirit, humility and even humiliation, and devotion to the Holy Eucharist. Ignatius of Loyola used to call Philip Neri 'the bell', since he was so effective in summoning the people of Rome to the Church (Bacci 2017: 21).

Philip's approach was slow and steady. 'While he wished to do the very work which Savonarola intended, he set about it… in a different way', Newman writes (Newman 1908: 231–232). He began by ministering to the poor, though he ended–up advising popes, nobles, philosophers, and artists. He was a heroic confessor, like John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, would later be. He was also heroically patient in a way that was not typical of Savonarola. Philip wept for the sins of men and took on severe penances on their behalf.

Philip 'allured men to the service of God so dexterously, and with such a holy, winning art, that those who saw it cried out, astonished: 'St. Philip draws souls as the magnet draws ironţ, Newman writes. And his work bore bountiful and lasting fruit in Rome and beyond. According to Newman, one pilgrim to Rome when St. Philip was about the age of fifty wrote, 'Among all the wonderful things which I saw in Rome, I took the chief pleasure in beholding the multitude of devout and spiritual persons who frequented the Oratory. Amid the monuments of antiquity, the superb palaces and courts of so many illustrious lords, it appeared to me that the glory of this exemplar shone forth with surpassing light' (Newman 1908: 237–239).

*An Appeal for Apostolic Purity and Godliness*

The example of Philip Neri, as well as the eloquent and spiritually pungent lessons drawn from the saint's life by John Henry Newman, provide a model

for today's clergy and faithful about how to work for deep and lasting ecclesial reform. Zeal is a great gift, but it must be tempered by Christ–like meekness and mercy. Mercy is not wimpiness or the abdication of one's duty to justice. Meekness and kindness do not make one wishy–washy, but rather make a person like Christ, who brought salvation to the whole world by means of humility and self–sacrificial love.

In all things, Christians are called to fight the evils of the day, within and outside of the Church, by becoming like Christ and sharing in his mission of salvation. John Henry Newman ended his second sermon on Philip Neri with a prayer that all Christians of today would do well to offer for each other:

> But I would beg for you this privilege, that the public world might never know you for praise or for blame, that you should do a good deal of hard work in your generation, and prosecute many useful labours, and effect a number of religious purposes, and send many souls to heaven, and take men by surprise, how much you were really doing, when they happened to come near enough to see it; but that by the world you should be overlooked, that you should not be known out of your place, that you should work for God alone with a pure heart and single eye, without the distractions of human applause, and should make Him your sole hope, and His eternal heaven your sole aim, and have your reward, not partly here, but fully and entirely hereafter (Newman 1908: 242).

**Charles Borromeo and Institutional Reform**

Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo knew each other well and admired each other's personal holiness and apostolic zeal and fruitfulness. In fact, whenever Charles Borromeo visited Philip Neri in Rome, Charles Borromeo would kneel before him, kiss his hands, and request his blessing. At the same time, a holy rivalry existed between them, including one incident when Charles, who was always on the lookout for the best available personnel, recruited a number of prospective members of Philip's Oratory and brought them into his service in Milan. Philip referred to Charles as the 'thief of men' (Cihak 2017: 15).

Having considered Philip's apostolate in Rome and its hallmark characteristics, points of comparison and contrast with the apostolic labors of Charles will quickly suggest themselves. Whereas Philip placed an earlier and heavier emphasis on internal conversion, confident that this would in turn prompt the sanctification of the institutional Church, Charles for the most part began the other way around. As a cardinal and later as Archbishop of Milan, Charles would promote a great program of institutional reform, which would have a salubrious effect on countless members of the clergy and laity. Both men combined sound, precise, if not highly ornate, preaching with severe asceticism, a penetrating critical eye towards the social and ecclesial ills of the day, a focus on conversion and salvation, and a dual–emphasis on

spiritual and corporal works of mercy in their apostolic programs. But no doubt Charles was born to be a leader and exercised a charism for ecclesial leadership from his young adulthood onward, spending his life for the building–up of the Church.

Charles Borromeo was born to earthly greatness yet dedicated his life to serving the Kingdom of God. His family was numbered among the great families of Lombardy. His uncle was elected pope in 1559, taking the name Pius IV. And Charles was created a cardinal and served as a close advisor to Pope Pius in Rome. The fulfillment of every usual secular ambition for a young man of his time and place would have come easily to Charles, yet from an early age he showed signs of a deep commitment to Christ and his Church.

The theological axiom 'Grace builds on nature and perfects it' holds true in the life of Charles Borromeo. Although it is easy, and to some extent accurate, to contrast the worldly grandeur into which he was born and raised with the more spiritual ambitions he adopted in the years of his early adulthood, in Charles these existential strands were woven together rather than entirely separated. Although he chose a path of spiritual purity and ecclesial reform, his approach to these pursuits was marked by his prior experience and his natural gifts for administration, orderly thinking, and adeptness in leading others, even the very powerful.

In his sermon for the liturgical feast of St. Charles Borromeo, Ronald Knox muses on the distinctively Italian genius Charles had for such leadership. According to Knox, raising–up men like Charles Borromeo during the most difficult moments of Church history is part of the designs of God's Providence:

> Say what you will, Italy breeds the genius for government. So the greatest of Latin poets saw, and summed it up for us in a phrase:
>
> > Others shall quicken bronze with softer grace, And from dull marble life's own features trace; Plead with more eloquence, the changing skies Map with more skill, and con the stars that rise: Roman, not these thy arts—thy agelong skill To wield thy empire o'er the peoples still.
>
> Anybody, in naming the world's great men, will give you almost at once the names of two Italians, Julius Caesar and Napoleon. And, whatever verdict history may pass on our own times, it is in Italy that the anarchical tendencies of the last half–century have provoked the first reaction in favour of efficient government. St. Charles came from a ruling family among that ruling race. Personal humility shone out in him as in the other saints; but there was something Latin all the same about the resolute competence with which he governed his diocese. Men called him a second St. Ambrose; and St. Ambrose, his predecessor in the See of Milan, was a civil magistrate before he was ever a bishop. It was no idle title to call St. Charles a prince of the Church (Knox 2002: 701).

Among other ways of speaking of the distinction between Philip Neri's approach to ecclesial reform and that of Charles Borromeo is to say that Philip's approach was more heavily *contemplative*, while that of Charles was more *active*. Of course, Philip spent much of his life engaged in intense apostolic labor, and Charles was a man of deep prayer and stern personal penance. Nevertheless, by birth, temperament, and experience Charles was suited to a life of action and institutional leadership.

Charles Borromeo's approach to ecclesial reform was centered on the Council of Trent, in which he had taken an active part as an organizer and which he sought to implement as Archbishop of Milan. Despite the importance of it decrees, the Council might have done very little, practically speaking, to benefit the Church if those decrees had not been implemented with great diligence by men such as Charles. In considering the nature of the reform wrought by Charles during the years following the Council, perhaps it will be helpful to look first at a few key principles of this reform, followed by a look at the practical steps Charles took in order to implement the vision of the Council, according to his own pastoral prudence.

*Principles of reform*

A first principle at any time of crisis in the life of the Church must be reliance upon Divine Providence and trust in the Lord Jesus. Ronald Knox tells a story about Julius Caesar that illustrates a foundational truth about how Charles Borromeo and other reformers faced the storms buffeting the Church of the sixteenth century:

> When Julius Caesar wished to cross from Durazzo to Brindisi in a little boat, and the master of it wanted to turn back, because the wind had risen and he was in danger of shipwreck, Caesar rebuked him for his cowardice in noble words that have come down to us: 'Take courage, my friend, take courage, and fear nothing; Caesar is your passenger, and Caesar's fortunes are your freight'. With greater, and with better grounded confidence, the Church of God, which is Peter's boat, has breasted the waves all through her troubled history. It is not upon the captain's judgment or the pilot's experience, not upon human wisdom or human prudence, that she depends for her safe voyage: she rests secure in the presence of her inviolable passenger. Yet we should do ill if we grudged recognition and gratitude to those servants of his who at various times have steered our course for us through difficult waters, and especially to the saints of the Counter–Reformation—that remarkable group of saints whom God raised up at the time of Europe's apostasy, by whose influence, humanly speaking, the faith survived that terrible ordeal (Knox 2002: 700–701).

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see the wisdom or folly of various courses of action taken by the great figures of history. At the moment when

those figures face decisions of such magnitude and consequence, they cannot know the future with certainty. Their only comfort must come from their conviction of the rightness of their actions, and their dependence upon God's providential care. There were so many forces acting against the stability and vitality of the Catholic Church during the second half of the sixteenth century that no sane person could have felt completely confident in his own ability to effect substantial change for the good. But Charles Borromeo had grown in stature as a man of God and as a churchman to such an extent that he was able to proceed on the path of reform with unwavering confidence. And only unwavering confidence matched with wisdom and holiness could have aided the Church in an age when she faced such seemingly intractable difficulties.

A second principle of reform Charles followed was that the Church exists as a hierarchical communion. Disorder had bred vice and disunity in the Renaissance Church, but the Council of Trent brought the hope of a restoration of ecclesial order. Knox writes:

> Whatever be the rights and wrongs of all the controversies we hear about the medieval Church, this at least is clear, that in the days of the Council of Trent its organization needed reform. And reform needs more than mere legislation to decree it; it needs administration to execute it. That is St. Charles's characteristic legacy to the Church: it was the influence of his example, in great measure, that moulded her organization on the new model which Trent had decreed. The bishop has got to be the centre of everything in his diocese, and the clergy of the diocese are to be *his* clergy—a family of which he is to be the father, a guild of which he is to be the master (Knox 2002: 702).

Knox's words may seem to some contemporary readers to place too much emphasis on the role of the bishop, but when one considers the disorders of the sixteenth century Church, the need for a stronger hierarchy becomes clearer. In one sermon, given at a 1579 provincial council over which he presided, Charles identifies a great many of the evils of the day. His list is a sobering reminder of the Latin proverb *corruptio optimae pessima* ('the corruption of the best is the worst'):

> How miserable were these recent times when for so long and in many places provincial councils and diocesan synods were no longer held but neglected and became entirely a thing of the past. As a result, a veritable forest of multiple evils came to be: basilicas left uncared for, the adornment of church furnishings reduced to nothing, the ritual and use of the ceremonies barely known, the correct celebration of the Divine Offices entirely disturbed, the discipline of choir rescinded, the duties of ecclesiastical functions disregarded and despised, sacerdotal and clerical residences deserted, all the duties of discipline at length thrown off and entirely laid aside, and furthermore the instruction and forming of the people was distorted. Corruption of morals appeared on all sides. The honor of feast days

> was violated by many sins. The upkeep of sacred places in many places suffered injury. The dignity of the sacerdotal order was treated as if it were nothing. In sum everything was reduced to such a state as to be worthy of tears, mourning and commiseration (Borromeo 2017: 40).

Charles Borromeo was not a man known for his dramatic oratorical flair or penchant for invective. His list of the ecclesial evils of his day, then, is an accurate, sober–minded presentation of what he saw around him and felt compelled to remedy with all–due haste and vigor. And he recognized that a renewed emphasis on hierarchical authority was an important principle of such reform. It is well known that he pressed with special force for bishops to reside in their dioceses, so that the fatherly, hierarchical authority of the bishops would be manifest and effective among the flocks entrusted to their care.

A third and complementary principle of reform was an emphasis on the sanctification of the laity. Of all the reforming efforts Charles undertook, helping his people to grow in holiness was 'the supreme purpose of all his pastoral work' (Orsenigo 1945: 89). This emphasis on the sanctification of the laity fits well with the Catholic Church's renewed understanding in our own day of the 'universal call to holiness'. Charles recognized the vital role that family life, work, and ordinary citizenship plays in the building up of God's Kingdom on earth. According to one commentator on the reforming genius of Charles Borromeo, 'St. Charles' efforts at the internal reform of the Church could be summarized in the practical phrase: Be who you promised you would be. Every member of the Mystical Body of Christ must be intentional about pursuing a life of holiness, according to one's particular state of life' (Cihak 2017: 17).

*Practical Steps on the Path of Reform*

In what practical ways did Charles Borromeo implement his principles of ecclesial reform? A consummate leader and administrator, Charles developed a clear plan of action and spent himself executing his pastoral plan with heroic zeal and a great deal of focus.

Much of this plan of action centered on the ministry of the bishop, as has been noted. Despite his being highly valued as an advisor and assistant to the pope, Charles led by example and took up residence in his episcopal see, Milan, as soon as possible after he was made archbishop. He then pressed the Tridentine norm that all diocesan bishops should reside in their dioceses. Of course, his greatest influence was in his own province, among his suffragan bishops. But episcopal residency was not the only reform related to the office of the bishop that Charles pursued in his program of reform.

Pastoral visitations were also an important way Charles revitalized the episcopal ministry.

Charles himself made countless visitations to parish churches, houses of religious communities, and other institutions under his pastoral care. He did so often at great personal cost, given the difficulties of travel and the mountainous terrain of much of northern Italy and Switzerland. But he saw the presence of the bishop to his people as an essential dimension of the bishop's fatherly and shepherding role in his diocese. Charles asked a great deal of his priests and people—no one questions that he was an exacting cardinal–archbishop—but he was the first to live what he preached, and even to practice a *more* rigorous form of the Christian life than what he asked of others.

Charles also believed firmly in episcopal and presbyteral collegiality, as opposed to each bishop acting in radical independence from each other in the governance of their respective dioceses, or priests doing so in their own parishes. This collegiality often took shape in the form of provincial councils and local synods, of which Charles was a great champion. It was seen above that the lack of such instruments of collegiality was, in his mind, a cause of many of the Church's ills, because of the disorder that resulted from weak ecclesial leadership.

There is an old joke that the priest is just the seminarian ordained, and then an extension which says that the bishop is the priest ordained once again. The joke is not an attempt to deny the grace of the Catholic Sacrament of Holy Orders, but it does highlight the truth that grace builds on nature, and that the sacraments, while powerfully efficacious, do not magically transform the personality. The joke also testifies to the essential role seminary formation plays in preparing clergyman for the holy work Christ calls them to undertake in his name.

Prior to the Council of Trent, however, the formation of future priests was a haphazard affair.

Oftentimes, a man would train as an apprentice under the direction of an experienced parish priest. Those who could and wished to avail themselves of the opportunity would study at one of the universities attached to the diocesan cathedrals of the day. But there were few universal standards, and the results were correspondingly poor. Many disorders existed in clerical life, including gross neglect of their duties by many priests (Orsenigo 1945: 79–80). The sins of priests even prompted a startling saying among the people of Lombardy, 'If you want to go to hell, become a priest' (Cihak 2017: 3). There is a mix of 'weeds' and 'wheat' among the clergy of every age, but the Renaissance Church does seem to have had more than its share of clerical weeds. The Council of Trent, therefore, laid down the strict directive that every diocese should establish its own seminary, in order to raise the standard of priestly formation.

Even larger dioceses, including Milan, faced practical obstacles to implementing this conciliar charge, but Charles Borromeo nevertheless persevered

and in 1564 established a seminary in Milan. He also founded smaller seminaries for more remote mountain districts under his pastoral care (Orsenigo 1945: 80).

Charles Borromeo also took many actions aimed at the sanctification of the laity. Of the utmost importance to him was divine worship, and so Charles promoted the dignified, disciplined, and reverent celebration of the sacred liturgy. He also promoted pilgrimages, the renewal of communities of religious sisters and brothers, and the creation or revitalization of other ecclesial institutions. Charles was acutely aware of a 'desacralizing current of Church life and society in general', which existed at the time, and worked tirelessly to combat this current (Cihak 2017: 3). He also dedicated himself to the corporal works of mercy and served heroically during the plague that swept Milan in 1576, claiming 25,000 lives. Imploring his priests to remain steadfast in their duties to the sick and dying, he challenged them: 'We have only one life and we should spend it for Jesus and souls—not as we wish, but at the time and in the way God wishes' (Cihak 2017: 12).

This spiritual *ferverino* given to his priests could also encapsulate the pastoral guidance Charles Borromeo gave to the laity. Though they lived in the world and performed many worldly tasks, their lives were to be entirely dedicated to Christ. Charles published a booklet for the lay faithful of Milan in 1577, outlining for them a plan of life that is broad in the scope of activities it addresses and detailed in its recommendations of prayer and good works. The Christian, according to Charles, in reading the booklet's words of guidance, 'is not only to know them but above all to practice them, because the well–being of our lives consists in the observance and not just in the thought of the will of God' (Borromeo 2017: 164). The booklet covers everything from praying at mealtime and other family activities, to employer–employee relations, to spiritual advice about guarding one's heart and one's language from all trace of evil influence.

A stereotype of the Tridentine–era Church suggests that the pursuit of holiness was the exclusive domain of the clergy and religious sisters and brothers. The evangelization efforts of Charles Borromeo make clear, however, that it was of paramount concern that the lay faithful also take up their share in the mission of Christ, becoming holy and encouraging a life of holiness in their families, communities, and places of business.

**Conclusion**

In all things, Charles Borromeo sought to increase the holiness of all the members of the Church, whether directly or through the renewal of the institutions under his pastoral care. In this focus on holiness of life, his ministry was closely synchronized with that of Philip Neri's apostolate in Rome, and

the following summary of Charles's core conviction applies equally to both men:

> St. Charles was convinced that the Church had within herself the capacity and the means to be reformed because this capacity and means of conversion to Jesus Christ existed in each member of the Church… When the individuals comprising the head and members of Christ's Mystical Body were converted, then the Church would be reformed. In other words, reform does not begin with 'the Church', 'her teachings', 'those bishops' or 'you'. Reform begins with 'me'. What in my life needs to change in order to follow Christ more closely? (Cihak 2017: 6) [In context, it is clear that by 'head and members' the author refers to the pope and the other members of the Church and not, as the terms often indicate, to Christ as Head and the clergy and faithful as members]

Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo did as much as any Catholic clergymen in the second–half of the sixteenth century to advance the cause of ecclesial reform. They both worked tirelessly to become holy themselves, combining intense prayer, personal penitential disciplines, and vigorous apostolic labor. They both saw clearly the evils and the opportunities of their time and place, and set out with focus and zeal to meet the most important pastoral challenges of the day. Although each had different gifts and backgrounds, their approaches to the apostolic ministry were complementary and effective in bringing about a renewal in the Church and the lives of her members. In so doing, they provide a model for ecclesial reform that is most apt today, at a time when the universal call to holiness and the personal encounter with Christ are strong points of emphasis in Catholic pastoral theology.

In the wake of so many scandals that were an unfortunate part of the legacy of the Renaissance Church, and the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church desperately needed saints to encourage and equip the clergy and faithful alike so that they too might become more like Christ, who is the light of the world, a light shining in the darkness, which the darkness has not and will not overcome (cf. John 8:12 and 1:5).

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