

## FABIOLA GIANCOTTI



FOR HEALTH REASONS  
ST. CHARLES BORROMEIO  
IN THE FOURTH CENTENARY  
OF HIS CANONIZATION 1610-2010

PER RAGIONI DI SALUTE  
SAN CARLO BORROMEIO  
NEL QUARTO CENTENARIO  
DELLA CANONIZZAZIONE 1610-2010

(2010), PAGES 1000, including 400 with colour illustrations

A man of great learning, St. Charles Borromeo played a key role in the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation. Through this new work, we can follow his intellectual journey

To mark the fourth centenary of his canonization on 1<sup>st</sup> November, his texts are returned to us in this unprecedented volume. Composed of ten chapters, it also has an Index Opera Borromeo, a **practical glossary and dictionary** with roughly 800 terms and thousands of instances of their use, taken from his published works. (*Omelie, Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis, Discorsi and Lettere*).

One of the chapters reconstructs **the history of the Borromeo family**, from the events leading to the formation of the Borromeo coat of arms (the full version of *La nobiltà borromea* of 1718 is included as an appendix), and from accounts of different periods found in the various Borromeo residences, particularly in Villa San Carlo Borromeo in Senago, which belonged to Cardinal Federico.

Another chapter examines the events surrounding what became known as “**St. Charles’ plague**”, in 1576. This epidemic was lesser known than the plague recorded later by Alessandro Manzoni, as, due to St. Charles’ timely action, there were fewer victims.

**The volume has numerous illustrations, with original reproductions of manuscripts and ancient codes and a gallery of 62 works of art, produced in the last twenty years by Italian and foreign painters and sculptors, published here for the first time.**

Lastly, a figure of St. Charles, the man, emerges from the **many accounts by popes and cardinals between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries**, from the notes of Pius X, Pius XI, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and of intellectuals such as Francesco Panigarola, Torquato Tasso, Federico Borromeo, G.B. Visconti, Giovanni Fratta, Giuseppe Ripamonti, Carlo Maria Maggi, G.A. Sassi, Alessandro Manzoni, Cesare Cantù and Aldo Gerbino.

An extensive and updated bibliography completes the work.

**Fabiola Giancotti** (1958), researcher, has lived in Milan since 1984. Editor at the publishing house Spirali, she has published and edited various books. These include the art books of: Alberto Bragaglia (*European Futurism*, 1997), of Antonio Vangelli (*The Festival of Life*, 1999), of Enzo Nasso (*Art*, 1999), of Andrei Lyssenko (*The Impression of Light*, 1999); the testimony of Mimmo Rotella (*The Hour of the Lizard*, 2002); the films *La rivoluzione di Malevič*, 2004 and *Piet Mondrian. La realtà dell’astrazione*, 2006. In 2001, the second edition of her *Dictionary of Ciphematics* was printed. Many articles and essays appeared in daily newspapers, magazines and collections from 1978. She is president of the association Il Club di Milano, co-publisher of this work.





ALEXEI LAZYKIN, *Portrait of St. Charles Borromeo. Homage to Ambrogio Figino*, 2002, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm.

## ST. CHARLES BORROMEIO, A MODERN INTELLECTUAL

Born into one of the richest noble families of Northern Italy in 1538, St. Charles Borromeo rose quickly to a position of influence in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in the Ambrosian (or Milanese) rite, becoming secretary of state to the Pope and Archbishop of Milan in his twenties.

From an early age he showed dedication to the poor and sick, and his personal intervention to assist the sick and limit contagion of the plague in Milan became legendary.

He was also a **great innovator and reformer**. As this volume shows, his language, speeches and pragmatic approach to every detail of life make him a **modern thinker who broke new ground**.

He used his influence to introduce important institutional changes in the Church. These strengthened and modernized it during the Counter-Reformation.

The city and county of St. Charles (Missouri), in the USA, and the city of San Carlos, in the Philippines, are named after him.



VALENTIN TERESHENKO, *St. Charles Borromeo*, 2005, oil on canvas, 70x100 cm.

### More Details

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From the top, centre: Humilitas, painted plaque; left, *Portrait of St. Charles Borromeo*, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.; right, GIACOMO CAMPI, *Map of the Borromeo Lands I*, 1912, fresco; middle, Borromeo Coat of Arms, from the title page of IO. BAPTISTÆ VICESCOMITIS, *De B. Carolo Borromaeo Centum Epigramata*; bottom, *In Paschate Arbor* (4<sup>a</sup>. BAM F. 189 inf.), manuscript, 40x54 cm.

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## I. 1.

Chaos and lightness  
The beginning of the word

Io. With the writings and works of St. Charles Borromeo the foundation ceases to qualify by its fundament and its fund.  
And the body that enters the scene inaugurates the arts of the sky (sculpture, painting, architecture)  
and the arts of paradise (dance, intelligence, music, strategy).\*

On 12 October 1538, Charles, second son of Giberto Borromeo and Margherita de' Medici, was born in Arona, on Lake Maggiore, northern Italy. Legends and narrations of his birth, too, were to have five centuries to enunciate and write themselves; fantasies, inventions, exaggerations? The urgency of sanctity, which gradually accompanied Charles' work from 1565 to 1584, armed the tale of his life with solid foundations. At various levels, that public that everyone calls the people, but which was no longer the people, as nothing is popular or populist in a work, demonstrated this by the huge mobilization for the process of his canonization (1602-1610). Nothing could have started such a scale of identification, except the decision, taken by this young man in his early twenties, to reap intellectual profit from things not of this world. [...]

Milan 1560. The years of the Torriani, the Visconti and the Sforza families — some members of the Borromeo family had held important positions in those preceding hundred years — had been glorious ones. The city was by now a metropolis on a par with Naples, Rome, or Venice, having undergone major developments in its urban structure, in the arts and sciences. Indeed it was a cradle for the genius of Renaissance artists such as Leonardo. Yet Milan found itself governed by German, French and Spanish armies who did tackle the issue of reforms, but without having the necessary instruments to do so.

Europe was mainly Catholic, but the hostilities between Christians and religious struggles were endless. The papal state took note of this, but its action was no more efficient than that of the kings. Luther and Calvin would not stop at the gates of Milan if there was no one to oppose them. And the city had no schools, no churches. The bishop had not been resident in his see for decades. Indeed, the governor of Milan exercised both civil and ecclesiastical authority. Nonetheless, the region was important, both for Italy and for Europe; both for Philip II, King of Spain, and for the Pope, Pius IV. After being nominated bishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo did not go there immediately. The conclusion of the Council of Trent — among other things — which was to take place on 26 January 1564 (begun in 1542, it had been suspended several times until 1552, then resumed in 1562), kept him in the Vatican. The whole of Borromeo's work was to be based on what was achieved at this Council.

In the meantime, Charles Borromeo sent Monsignor Ormaneto to Milan, who reported to him in detail on the work that awaited him there. Ormaneto was also of use to him for the Spanish question. Charles Borromeo made his official entrance into the diocese on 23 September 1565, on the eve of his twenty-seventh birthday. Besides the accounts of the time, he himself also described this meeting, and his tone is that of the narration of something extraordinary. So there he was, in Milan, the former bishopric of St. Ambrose, teacher and master of life. The city had also been temporarily home to St. Augustine, who began laying the foundations here for *The Confessions* and for *The City of God*. The Ambrosian rite was to actually strengthen and keep its characteristics thanks to Borromeo (who took from the Council of Trent and gave with the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*). He reconstructed Christian history and its leading figures. He made an inventory of traditions, churches, districts, saints, and therefore relics, prayers, hymns and rules. For each occasion, using the Ambrosian calendar, he restored dignity to the Catholic map of Milan and celebrated her saints: Simplicianus, Eustorgius, Lawrence, Babila, Fidelis, Gervasius and Protasius, Thecla, Radegund, Stephen and Sebastian. The material was immense and was to arrive, sent in various forms by the Cardinal, to each inhabitant of the city and countryside. Places, houses, churches and districts were to acquire new value. Subsequently, columns, altars and aedicules rose up in all the roads. In this way, all the prayers of each inhabitant of the city were sustained and aroused by images, writings and monuments.

The Diocese of Milan was already very large; it stretched as far as Piedmont, passed through Switzerland and reached the Veneto and Emilia regions. Several times, the Cardinal carried out pastoral visits, which were very well prepared and researched. For communication he used such means as pastoral letters, correspondence with prelates, priests, deacons, governors and with various other figures. The diocesan synods and provincial councils proved to be highly efficient. Apart from the first one, called in Rome and presided by Monsignor Ormaneto in 1564, all the others (eleven diocesan synods and six provincial councils) were exclusively the work of Borromeo. The second synod, held in August 1568 and the first to be presided by the Cardinal, was attended by 1500 participants. Subjects, materials, proposals and conclusions were discussed in three days (apart from the fourth council, which went on for twenty-two days and at which the district vicars were present). At the opening and closing of each session he spoke himself. The correspondence relating to these occasions is extremely interesting (summons, orders of the day, acceptances of the invitation and refusals, and the reasons given, organization of hospitality in convents, clergy houses, public and private buildings, taken over and set up to provide board and lodging for the guests, health care and suggestions for running each parish in the absence of a priest). The proceeds were ready for publication immediately. Transcription, revision, printing and distribution were supervised personally by Charles Borromeo, and not only on these occasions. Meanwhile, among the consultants, professionals, educators, researchers, writers whom he brought with him from Rome, or whom he had picked out in the different cities to assist him, and to whom he entrusted highly important tasks, a number stood out in particular: Agostino Valier, for example, bishop of Verona, of whom he was to request a “Homilario”, Carlo Bascapé (who became his secretary and was to write his first biography), Giovanni Botero (later author of *The Reason of State*), Guglielmo Sirleto (future prefect of the Vatican Library, translator of Giovanni Crisostomo and reviser of the *Catechism*), etc. The fruits of the councils were many and proficuous and were the basis for the whole question of Catholicism in the West. A few decades after the invention of printing, documents as extensive and complex as those produced in Milan, which were unique, had an extraordinary level of distribution for many decades thanks also to the printing works of Aldo Manuzio, friend and assistant of the Milanese Cardinal.

From 1565, first the wait, then the expectations of the Milanese regarding Charles Borromeo were huge. The Spanish governor was not among the worst, given the catholicity of the king. However, his representatives living in the city and who had control of it were irked by the popularity of the archbishop. Thus, many complained to Spain, reported to the Pope, teased Borromeo and annoyed him deliberately. Tension rose to a point where communication was jeopardized. The different sides were never clearly opposed. Borromeo provoked discontent among religious ranks too: he reformed institutions, he closed convents, he established new rules and reintroduced abandoned ones. He did not enter into complicity with anyone who did not reason, or who let themselves go. Not for the first time did some people react in an uncivil manner to such actions, thereby creating the enemy, preventing him from speaking and sometimes making attempts on his life. This represents a difficult chapter in history. Up to this point we have adhered to the documentary evidence, we have told the parable of a cardinal. Now, though, in order to proceed with the narration, we must bring to light things about that cardinal that no one has mentioned in almost half a millennium. And we must read between the lines what is recounted by tens of thousands of pages, all hagiographic and laudatory, and, on the other hand, by a few hundred denigrating and deprecating ones.

26 October 1569: several sources<sup>2</sup> recount the shot from an arquebus that nearly took Borromeo’s life. The circumstances had all the makings of a hostile, deliberate and determined attempt, with the involvement of various people, as the subsequent enquiry established. The intention had its culprits and its punishments, but the matter developed and spread with other linguistic elements altogether.

The Cardinal’s testimony is sober. He accuses no one and does not defend himself either, but simply remarks that he is not offended. However, the episode was so inadmissible, incomprehensible and inconceivable, that it was to shake conviction, knowledge and realism on one hand, while consolidating resentment, vicious gossip and calumny on the other. To proceed, Charles Borromeo had to tackle every issue: writing, talking, meeting people he could work with and converse with in every city, informing the Pope and the King of Spain of what was happening in Milan, gradually elaborating on the matter and the project of his bishopric. Step by step, conclusion by conclusion, device by device.

Scholars maintain that the Cardinal was not a theoretician, that he cannot be counted among theologians and that the “corpus” of his work is not pedagogic. Indeed, in our opinion, Charles Borromeo’s work should not be studied, but read. Unfortunately, it is still for the most part inaccessible. Nonetheless, the material known and published so far returns to us a complex figure, whose verbal expression — which comes to us through transcriptions and comparisons between transcriptions, of those who listened to him and followed him — is no less important than his writings. These, on the other hand, are composed of letters, documents, acquisitions and dispositions of the council, formalities and indications for publishing text books, technical instructions and notices. The schools that Charles Borromeo founded had to train young people, but also the trainers, and for this he needed the best people he could find. Once again, he found them among the Jesuits, the Theatines, the Barnabites and the Capuchins. Above all, however, he found them among the Oblates of St. Ambrose, who were to follow the Bishop with the vow of obedience and who were to reside in the diocese. It was the Oblates, whose constitution was written between 1570 and 1578, who helped the Borromeo era succeed in Milan.

His duties in Milan did not prevent the Cardinal from following events in Rome, when necessary. He served three popes during his life — Pius IV, his uncle, with whom he carried out the great work of the Council of Trent; Pius V, with whom he established a distance from the Spanish Inquisition, and Gregory XIII, with whom he enacted numerous reforms of the Roman Catholic Church, including the legitimization of the Ambrosian rite, with its calendar, its religious orders... Between 1574 and 1575, Charles Borromeo worked with Gregory XIII to plan the eleventh jubilee of Christianity. He received permission for the Ambrosian jubilee of 1576 (February to July), announced by the Diocese of Milan for the benefit of all the pilgrims who had not been able to travel to Rome. In Milan, as in Rome, the instruments were: prayer (the itinerary of the seven Roman churches was acquired entirely by Milan, which indicated its churches: the Duomo, St. Ambrose, St. Lawrence, St. Nazarius, St. Simplicianus, St. Stephen and St. Victor), the transfer of the bodies of the saints, the sacraments, but above all indulgences. All this occurred on the eve of the most difficult year for Charles’ leadership of the church in Milan, remembered as the year of St. Charles’ plague, between 1576 and 1577<sup>3</sup>.

This was when Charles Borromeo’s contribution in Milan wrote itself. Everyone fled, the governors and those still apparently healthy. Those who did not flee abandoned themselves, were seized by terror and let themselves go. Charles Borromeo organized places for care, called priests from outside too, enlisted volunteers, set up the Lazaret in via san Gregorio, opened churches and convents, distributed provisions and celebrated mass in every district. As civil, administrative, judicial and military aspects had been left vacant, they were taken over by the church and organized for the extraordinary circumstance. Charles Borromeo refused to take this emergency lying down. The recent jubilee celebrations had given the Milanese people other arms to fight with. They had introduced the notions of prayer and of need. They had given some teaching about the sacraments, they had told the story of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection, they had stimulated the mind towards other purposes. Furthermore, removal and resilience had prevented events from becoming oppressive. Writers, artists and poets narrate this episode without sparing themselves the surprise, the wonder, the hope of that year and half of extreme difficulty. With trade, craft and professional activities suspended, the Cardinal had taken on the whole organization of the city. Towards Autumn, when the contagion did not diminish despite the quarantine, the processions organized by Borromeo attracted huge numbers. But the nobles at the rear accused him of violating standards of hygiene and of spreading the plague. Charles Borromeo realised, though, that the bet of health is by battle, by need, by never abandoning oneself. And that it proceeds from prayer. In this way, he was able to establish the grand festival of health, to be celebrated on 20 January 1578 in the Temple of St. Sebastian, restored and rebuilt for this purpose, well in advance. The damage of this pandemic was limited when compared to the others, both before and after, which scourged the city. A large detailed map of Milan (1578) preserves the memory of this event.

Born into a family that boasted St. Justine among its ancestors, and whose patrimony had been increased, enhanced and consolidated by its members, Charles Borromeo was heir to a considerable part of this wealth (he was to manage his elder brother’s share as well, after he died at a young age). Right from the beginning of his investiture and for the needs of the Diocese, he sold a number of properties. He renounced the Rocca di Arona [the old fortress where he had been born] when the Milanese administration tried to blackmail him on matters of ecclesiastical authority. After his father died at 46 years old, his sisters were to have dowries and marriages. He was

very far from his relatives, but not from their demands and their arguments. Of the family crest, as complex as it was enigmatic, he took and maintained the motto *Humilitas*.

During the nineteen years in which he worked in the Diocese of Milan, Charles Borromeo visited towns and cities, villages, districts, churches, monuments and places of prayer several times. He gave instructions, established architectural, urban, liturgical and social plans of action. He dictated rules for reception, education and care. Numerous volumes contain the records of his apostolic visits, some already published, others still unpublished. He also travelled either to help his friends or assistants in need, or for reasons of health. And for reasons of health too, he went as a pilgrim several times to the Holy Mounts, in Varese, but above all in Varallo. The construction of the Holy Mount of Varallo dates from the end of the fifteenth century, when Father Caimi brought a relic of the Holy Sepulchre with him and proposed reconstructing, as in the Holy Land, the stations of the life of Christ. The way this was perceived by Charles Borromeo, the artists and the workmen who helped to build it, and each person who went through it over the centuries that followed, was such that no one ever went away from it without having acquired something. Then and now. But the Cardinal had a particular interest for the Christian parable. It was also thanks to him that the Holy Shroud lies in Turin today. It arrived there from Chambéry, brought by the Savoias, who used Charles Borromeo's<sup>4</sup> request as a pretext. For they were tied to him by extreme gratitude and they came to meet him in Vercelli. In Milan, on the other hand, lies the Holy Nail, which had so moved the Milanese people since it was found by St. Ambrose. Borromeo understood the sacred through these legacies. And he knew how to enhance them and make them bear fruit.

Other details, he was to establish through art, in its various forms. Painting was to be a very beautiful instrument for recounting the stories of the Bible. And architecture was to receive people in the mode of celebration, like music. Here too, he found entrusted assistants (Pellegrino Tibaldi, the architect, and Palestrina, the musician, for example), who followed him for many years. No expense was spared when it came to building, or rebuilding, structures for worship, for training, for the city: from the Brera College to the one in Pavia, from the Seminario Maggiore to the Swiss College (today the State Archive), from Le Stelline orphanage to the extension of the Ospedale Maggiore and of the Duomo, from the Church of St. Fidelis to the sanctuaries of Saronno and Rho, etc. There was another tradition, however, that he brought back: homilies and preaching.

There was no remarkably able preacher who did not pass through Milan at the time of Charles Borromeo. They came from all over Italy and Europe. The Cardinal insisted, until they began to come; he wrote letters, sent despatches and, when necessary, sought the Pope's intervention. Among them was the very well-known Panigarola, whose panegyrics are still masterpieces of eloquence today. Thanks to Sassi, the very special prefect of the Ambrosian library in the eighteenth century, we have the collection of many homilies pronounced by Borromeo for each occasion of the Ambrosian liturgy. And thanks to Carlo Marcora, we have the publication of the *arbores*, which preceded or accompanied the homilies. Written in the form of a chart, a sketch, a trace almost, a table, a programme, joined by quotations, cross references and notes, its outline is reminiscent of a tree, a cross, a vertical line. On these sheets of paper, the cardinal noted, planned and wrote his homily, composing the text as he spoke. It is impossible to establish a sequence of subjects, themes or issues: it must surely have been according to the circumstance, each time.

All we have to do is read, and understand something. The intellectual importance of Charles Borromeo seems to us, all things considered, to be his absolute loyalty with regard to the Catholic question. Having invented and constructed many instruments that the epoch could certainly not provide, he gave Milan and Italy a solid and safe basis on which to proceed. Thus, still today, Milan is Catholic.

## NOTES

\* Armando Verdiglione, *Il giardino dell'automa*, Milan 1984.

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Marcora, *Le lettere giovanili di san Carlo. 1551-1560*, in "Memorie Storiche della Diocesi di Milano", n. 14, Milan 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Luigi Anfosso, *Storia dell'archibugiata tirata a san Carlo*, Milan 1913.

<sup>3</sup> Paolo Bellintani, *Dialogo sulla peste, 1577*, Milan 2001 and Francesco La Cava, *La peste di san Carlo vista da un medico*, Milan 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Borromeo, *Il Santo del Verbanò*, "Verbanus", n. 5, Intra-Milano 1984.