

The Comasque parishes

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In the four common bailiwicks and in the Bellinzonese, the ordinary was the bishop of Como. Since Como belonged to the province of Aquileia, Borromeo had no metropolitan authority there. He could act through his influence on the bishops of Como, through his collaborators and in particular matters under a special papal commission, as in the negotiations over the Papiro bequest at Ascona, which he conducted on behalf of Gregory XIII.¹ The bishops of Como themselves visited their Swiss parishes repeatedly in the decades after Trent. The most important of these visitations was that of the Dominican Feliciano Ninguarda, a native of Morbegno in the Valtellina who had served as papal nuncio in southern Germany from 1578 to 1583 and was bishop of Como from 1588 until his death in January 1595. He visited the Valtellina in 1589 and 1593 and the Ticinese parishes in 1591.² His records describe each parish of the Swiss part of the diocese, its clergy, its population and its property. The acts of the Ninguarda visitation, annotated and published by the priest Santo Monti from 1892 onwards, are among the most important sources for the reconstruction of those decades, including the population and church property of the Sottoceneri and the Locarnese.³

The Borromean model also reached the Confederation through Borromeo's collaborators. Giovanni Francesco Bonomi (Bonhomini), born in Cremona in 1536, a lawyer trained at Pavia and Bologna and bishop of Vercelli from 1572, served as papal nuncio to the Swiss from 1579 to 1581. He visited parishes and convents in the dioceses of Constance, Basel, Chur, Lausanne and Sion, promoted the foundation of the Jesuit college of Fribourg in 1580 and obtained the resignation of the bishop of Chur in the same year.⁴ His insistence on clerical celibacy and on the enclosure of nuns met resistance among the clergy. His attempts to exclude the temporal authorities from ecclesiastical jurisdiction provoked the opposition of the cantonal governments, Catholic as well as Reformed. The same tension marked the Italian bailiwicks, where any examination of church property

touched the interests of local notables and of the ruling cantons. The conflict between visitors and secular elites over who controlled the money of the parishes is a constant of the period.

1 The Mesolcina and the witch trials of 1583

The most dramatic episode of Borromeo's activity in the Swiss south took place outside the bailiwicks. The Mesolcina, the valley of the Moesa that descends from the San Bernardino pass to Bellinzona, belonged to the Grey League and therefore to the Three Leagues of the Grisons, which were allies of the Confederation without being part of it. The valley had remained decidedly Catholic within a Grisons state that was confessionally mixed.⁵ In 1583 the local authorities asked Borromeo for help against what they described as a spread of witchcraft and against the deplorable state of pastoral care. Borromeo arrived in Roveredo on 27 November 1583. He found clergy living in concubinage and encouraging superstitious practices. The provost of San Vittore, Domenico Quattrino, was himself accused of witchcraft.⁶

The visit combined reform and repression. With the local authorities, Borromeo founded a school staffed by two Jesuits, which attracted hundreds of boys within a few weeks, and replaced the unsuitable clergy with trained priests, among them a new provost, Giovanni Pietro Stoppani. At the same time trials for witchcraft were held. According to the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, eleven persons condemned as witches were sent to the stake at Roveredo in 1583, although the number of victims is given differently in other literature. The Reformed leaders of the Grisons accused the notables of the Mesolcina of collaborating with Catholic foreign powers, Spain and Savoy, and saw the visit as an intrusion into Grisons sovereignty.⁷ The sermons that Borromeo preached in 1583 at Ascona and Cannobio in June and at Roveredo and Bellinzona at the end of November and the beginning of December have been edited in 2024 by Fabio Giunta for the State Publishing House of the Canton of Ticino. They show the archbishop's insistence on conversion, on the correct reception of the Eucharist and on the dependence of peace and prosperity on the true faith.⁸

The witch trials of the Mesolcina belong to the darkest pages of the Catholic reform in the Alps, and modern Catholic historiography acknowledges them as such. For the theme of this book they show the limits of the comparison between visitation and supervision: the same apparatus that inventoried the property of churches also prosecuted

persons. In the late sixteenth century the boundary between discipline of conduct and discipline of belief did not exist in the modern sense.

Year Borromeo and the Swiss south 1560 Protector of the Catholic Swiss at the Holy See 1565 Enters Milan (September) 1566 Permanent residence in Milan; begins to implement Trent in the Swiss territories 1567 First visit to the Swiss parishes of Milan 1570 Journey in Switzerland; visit to the Swiss parishes of Milan 1579 Founds the Collegio Elvetico; asks for a permanent nunciature 1583 Mesolcina, Bellinzona, Ascona; witch trials at Roveredo 1584 Sponsors the Collegio Papio; dies 3 November 1586 Nunciature in Lucerne; Golden League, later Borromean League (5 October) 1610 Canonized (1 November)

The table draws on the sources cited in this section.⁹

Common misconception. Borromeo is often remembered in Ticino as the bishop of the Ticinese parishes. He was bishop only of the Ambrosian parishes of the Tre Valli, Capriasca and Brissago. The other Ticinese parishes belonged to the diocese of Como, whose bishops carried out their own visitations. Como was then a suffragan of Aquileia, so that Borromeo acted there only through his influence, through his collaborators and, in particular matters, through special papal commissions. The Diocese of Lugano, which today covers the whole canton, was created in stages between the federal decree of 1859 and the papal bull of 1971.

2 Notes

1. Janke and Huber, "Ascona", in DSS, version of 25 August 2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/002086/2009-08-25/> (negotiations on the Papio bequest conducted by Borromeo on behalf of Gregory XIII). ↩
2. Pierre Surchat, "Ninguarda, Feliciano", transl. Maddalena Disch, in DSS, version of 9 September 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017891/>. ↩
3. Santo Monti (ed.), *Atti della visita pastorale diocesana di F. Feliciano Ninguarda, vescovo di Como (1589–1593)*, 2 vols (Como 1892–1898); see also G. Perotti and S. Xeres (eds), *F. Ninguarda riformatore cattolico* (1999), cited by Surchat (above). Wikipedia (consulted as a last resort), "Feliciano Ninguarda", https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feliciano_Ninguarda (the visitation acts "annotati e pubblicati dal Sac. Dott. Santo Monti nel 1892"; his reports "importantissime per la ricostruzione storica di quei decenni"). ↩

4. Urban Fink, "Bonomi, Giovanni Francesco", transl. Alberto Tognola, in DSS, version of 8 November 2002, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017886/>. ↩
5. Antonietta Moretti, review of Fabio Giunta (ed.), Carlo Borromeo, *Prediche nelle terre della Lombardia elvetica (1583)*, in Archivio Storico Lombardo online, <https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/aslonline/article/download/31410/26163/95426>. ↩
6. Moretti (as above): visit to the Mesolcina on 27 November 1583, at the request of the local authorities; clergy in concubinage; the provost Domenico Quattrino accused of witchcraft; school with two Jesuits; new provost Giovanni Pietro Stoppani. ↩
7. Moretti (as above), on the accusations of collaboration with Spain and Savoy. De Certeau, "Carlo Borromeo, santo" (above): "Nel 1583 a Roveredo (nella Val Mesocco) undici streghe furono condannate al rogo". ↩
8. Fabio Giunta (ed.), Carlo Borromeo, *Prediche nelle terre della Lombardia elvetica (1583)*, Testi per la storia della cultura della Svizzera italiana 17 (Bellinzona: Edizioni dello Stato del Cantone Ticino 2024); presentation by the Biblioteca cantonale di Lugano, 23 May 2025, <https://www2.sbt.ti.ch/all/evento/62023.pdf> (eight homilies at Ascona, Bellinzona, Roveredo and Cannobio); Moretti (as above), on the dates and content. The flyer gives Bellinzona as the place of publication. ↩
9. Table compiled from Crivelli, "Borromeo, Carlo" (above), for 1560, 1566, 1579, 1584, 1586 (nunciature) and 1610; Rudolf Bolzern, "Lega d'Oro", in DSS, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017187/>, for 5 October 1586; Moretti (above) for 1583. Ostinelli, Crivelli and Panzera, "Milano (arcidiocesi)" (above), for 1567 and 1570; De Certeau, "Carlo Borromeo, santo" (above), for the entry into Milan in September 1565 and the visits to Switzerland in 1570. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helicaregister.com/lugano-the-comasque-parishes