

The Milanese model: councils, synods and the Acta

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Borromeo's main instrument was legislation. Between 1564, when the first diocesan synod opened on 29 August, and 1582 he convened six provincial councils for the province of Milan, as the Council of Trent had prescribed, and a series of diocesan synods for his own archdiocese. Their decrees covered the residence and conduct of priests, the administration of sacraments, preaching, schools of Christian doctrine, the architecture and furnishing of churches, the management of church property, the regulation of confraternities, marriage, public morality and commercial practices such as usury and the observance of feast days in markets. In 1582 the decrees and instructions were collected in the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*, a compilation that became a model for bishops throughout Catholic Europe and was printed many times.¹ For the parishes of the Tre Valli, these decrees were directly applicable. The diocese of Como was not bound by them, since it belonged to the province of Aquileia, but its bishops, among them Giovanni Antonio Volpi (bishop 1559–1588) and later the Dominican Feliciano Ninguarda (bishop 1588–1595), followed the Borromean model in their own visitations.²

The reform met resistance in Milan itself. Borromeo's conflict with the Spanish governors over ecclesiastical jurisdiction lasted throughout his episcopate and led in 1573 to his excommunication of the governor of the State of Milan, Luis de Zúñiga y Requesens. On 26 October 1569 a member of the order of the Humiliati from the house of Brera, Farina, whose order he had tried to reform, fired a shot at him. The order was suppressed by Pius V in 1571, and part of its property later served Borromeo's colleges.³ During the plague of 1576–1577, which the Milanese remember as the *peste di San Carlo*, he stayed in the city, organized relief and spent his own fortune on the sick. He died on 3 November 1584 at the age of forty-six, exhausted by work and penance. He was canonized on 1 November 1610 and became the patron saint of Catholic Switzerland.⁴

1 A legal mind in a pastoral office

The image of Borromeo as an ascetic saint obscures the fact that he was a lawyer by training and an administrator by temperament. His decrees are precise. His instructions for visitors specify the questions to be asked and the documents to be produced, while his insistence on inventories, registers and accounts reflects a canonist's understanding that discipline depends on records. Registers of baptisms and marriages, made obligatory by Trent in 1563, were introduced systematically in the Ambrosian valleys under his government, while registers of burials became obligatory in Italy only in 1614. Inventories of church property, lists of foundations and accounts of confraternities were demanded at every visitation. The modern historian of Ticino owes to this documentary zeal a large part of the sources on the economic life of the parishes. For the argument of this chapter, the decisive point is that Borromeo's reform turned the ecclesiastical economy of the valleys into a documented, audited and supervised system.⁵

Essentials. Carlo Borromeo (1538–1584) was a doctor of both laws, Secretary of State to his uncle Pius IV and, from 1560, administrator of the archdiocese of Milan and protector of the Catholic Swiss at the Holy See. Permanently resident in Milan from 1566, he implemented the decrees of Trent through six provincial councils, his diocesan synods and systematic visitations, collected in the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis* of 1582. His jurisdiction covered the Ambrosian valleys of Ticino. In the Comasque parishes, which belonged to the province of Aquileia, he acted through his influence on the bishops of Como, through papal commissions and through his collaborators. He founded the Collegio Elvetico in Milan in 1579, sponsored the Collegio Papio in Ascona and pressed for the papal nunciature in Lucerne, which opened in 1586.

2 Notes

1. De Certeau, "Carlo Borromeo, santo" (as above), on the six provincial councils prescribed by Trent and the first diocesan synod of 29 August 1564. *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis* a Carolo Cardinali S. Praxedis Archiepiscopo condita (Milan 1582). ↩
2. On Ninguarda's episcopate (1588–1595) see Pierre Surchat, "Ninguarda, Feliciano", in DSS, version of 9 September 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/017891/>. Ostinelli, Crivelli and Panzera, "Como (diocesi)", in DSS (above), for Volpi (1559–1588) and the numerous pastoral visitations of the period. ↩

3. De Certeau, "Carlo Borromeo, santo" (as above): the attempt of 26 October 1569 by Farina of the Humiliati house of Brera; dissolution of the order by the pope in 1571; excommunication of the governor Luis de Zúñiga y Requesens in 1573; the plague of 1576. ↩
4. Crivelli (as above): died in Milan on 3 November 1584, canonized on 1 November 1610, "patrono della Svizzera cattolica". ↩
5. Council of Trent, Session XXIV (11 November 1563), Decretum de reformatione matrimonii, c. 1 (Tametsi) and 2; Wikipedia (consulted as a last resort), "Tametsi", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tametsi> (chapter 1 of the decree on the reform of matrimony: "For the first time, a record of marriage was to be kept"), and "Parish register", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_register (registers "mandatory in Italy for baptisms and marriages in 1563 after the Council of Trent [...] and in 1614 for burials"); Saulle Hippenmeyer, "Parrocchia" (above), on the parish priest's duty to keep registers. See also Ceschi, Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento (Bellinzona 2000). ↩

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