

Saint Gregory Barbarigo

SAINT OF THE DAY

18_06_2020



When in May 1656 Rome was struck by a terrible plague, Saint Gregory Barbarigo (1625-1697) had only been a priest for five months and had not yet turned 31. And yet Alexander VII, who knew his virtues well, put him at the head of the special commission that organised relief for the plague victims. Gregory dedicated himself body and soul to that mission, working above all in the Trastevere district, the hotbed of the disease. Until the summer of 1657, when the epidemic ended, the saint visited the sick in person. He took care to give a dignified burial to the dead and to coordinate aid for the homes that

had been closed because of the danger of contagion, paying special attention to widows and orphans.

This charitable service was the fruit of his early life. Born into a noble Venetian family, at the age of two he lost his mother, who had died of the plague. His father, Senator of the Republic of Venice, was a fervent Catholic and together with his son he prayed the Office of the Virgin Mary every day. In 1643, after training in warfare sciences and diplomacy, Gregory went to Germany. He stayed there for three years, to participate in the complex negotiations that later led to the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). It was on German soil that he met Bishop Fabio Chigi, the future Alexander VII. When the latter, with the plague in Rome now near its end, offered Gregory the office of bishop of Bergamo, the young priest asked the pontiff to let him first celebrate a Mass, to take counsel from God and know from Him whether or not to accept the very high ministry to which he was being called.

On 29 July 1657 he was ordained bishop of Bergamo. He gave the poor the money that had been allocated for his reception. Later, wanting to imitate the example of Saint Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), he sold all his goods and distributed the proceeds to the needy. He increased the spread of the Catholic press, favouring the writings of Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622). He diligently took care of the teaching of the Catechism, believing it fundamental to transmit the truths of faith to Christians of all ages. He had a great love for the Eucharist and ordered the doorkeeper of the bishop's palace to wake him at any hour of the night in case there was a sick person in need. "It's my duty, and I can't do otherwise!" he once replied to the doctor who asked him not to tire himself too much with visits. For all these works, some Milanese came to say to their friends from Bergamo: "We have a dead cardinal saint, Saint Charles Borromeo, you have a living bishop".

Alexander VII also wanted to make him a cardinal and in 1664 sent him as bishop to Padua, where he led the diocese until his death, for 33 years. Aware of the need to have well-trained priests, it was he who founded the Patavino Seminary, which became one of the best in Europe for the quality of theological teaching, anchored in Tradition. He took part in four conclaves, and in two he was among the most likely papal candidates. He died on 18 June 1697 after one of his many pastoral visits, when the entire diocese of Padua was by then strewn with schools of Catholic doctrine. Beatified in 1761, he was proclaimed saint by a pope who had been devoted to him since his youth: Saint John XXIII who in his homily for canonisation, called Saint Gregory Barbarigo "the greatest imitator of Saint Charles".