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Prayer Must Come First

St. Charles Borromeo



This excerpt from a sermon by Saint Charles Borromeo (Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis, Mediolani 1599, 1177-1178) is used in the Roman Office of Readings for the feast (liturgical memorial) of St. Charles Borromeo on November 4th. Charles Borromeo, related to the famous Medici family through his mother, was a nephew of Pope Paul IV. He was called by the Pope to serve as Cardinal-deacon and secretary of state and was ultimately consecrated Archbishop of Milan in 1564. He dedicated the remaining 20 years of his life to the reform of the clergy and the pastoral care of his people, zealously implementing the decrees of the Council of Trent. He died on November 3, 1584.

I admit that we are all weak, but if we want help, the Lord God has given us the means to find it easily. One priest may wish to lead a good, holy life, as he knows he should. He may wish to be chaste and to reflect heavenly virtues in the way he lives. Yet he does not resolve to use suitable means, such as penance, prayer, the avoidance of evil discussions and harmful and dangerous friendships. Another priest complains that as soon as he comes into church to pray the office or to celebrate Mass, a thousand thoughts fill his mind and distract him from God. But what was he doing in the sacristy before he came out for the office or for Mass? How did he prepare? What means did he use to collect his thoughts and to remain recollected?

Would you like me to teach you how to grow from virtue to virtue and how, if you are already recollected at prayer, you can be even more attentive next time, and so give God more pleasing worship? Listen, and I will tell you. If a tiny spark of God's love already burns within you, do not expose it to the wind, for it may get blown out. Keep the stove tightly shut so that it will not lose its heat and grow cold. In other words, avoid distractions as well as you can. Stay quiet with God. Do not spend your time in useless chatter.

If teaching and preaching is your job, then study diligently and apply yourself to whatever is necessary for doing the job well. Be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing, but live otherwise, and your words will bring only cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head.

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Are you in charge of a parish? If so, do not neglect the parish of your own soul, do not give yourself to others so completely that you have nothing left for yourself. You have to be mindful of your people without becoming forgetful of yourself.

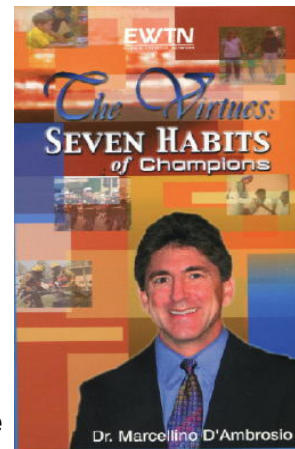
My brothers, you must realize that for us churchmen nothing is more necessary than meditation. We must meditate before, during and after everything we do. The prophet says: *I will pray, and then I will understand.* When you administer the sacraments, meditate on what you are doing. When you celebrate Mass, reflect on the sacrifice you are offering. When you pray the office, think about the words you are saying and the Lord to whom you are speaking. When you take care of your people, meditate on how the Lord's blood that has washed them clean so that *all that you do becomes a work of love.*

This is the way we can easily overcome the countless difficulties we have to face day after day, which, after all, are part of our work: in meditation we find the strength to bring Christ to birth in ourselves and in other men.

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