

ST. PHILIP NERI

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PIPPO BUONO

Some young men were playing games in the warm Roman sunshine outside Philip Neri's room. When Baronius, the learned Church historian intent on his writing protested at the noise, Philip told them to go on. "So long as they don't sin", he said, "they can chop wood on my back". This little incident from a long and crowded life of nearly eighty years is typical of the man who is known as the 'Apostle of Rome' and the founder of the Oratory. It shows his love of youth, the pains he took to draw them to God's service and to make that service attractive. In his last years he had a balcony above his room where he could see the sky and where he would go for long hours of solitary prayer. When summoned to hear confessions or to see someone who had called he came down instantly with the words "We must leave Christ for Christ". Philip was a mystic of the highest order, a man of ecstasies and visions, whose greatest happiness was to be alone with God. Yet at the call of charity he gave up the delight of prayer and sought God instead in helping his neighbour. His whole life is that of the contemplative in action.

It was lived against the background of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation or Catholic Revival. He was two years old when Luther began his revolt against the Church in Germany. He arrived in Rome one year before King Henry VIII was declared Supreme Head of the Church in England, and the Society of Jesus was founded in the Crypt of Montmartre. "A more hidden force than this militant company [the Jesuits] and one just as vital to the ultimate success of Trent and all that Trent stood for, was the influence of the Florentine priest St Philip Neri (1515-95) who for forty years from his obscure room in Rome directed the salvation of the great world of the Curia". (Mgr. Hughes Popular History of the Church'). Philip Neri played a notable part in the change from the worldly Renaissance court of Leo X. to the reformed baroque Rome of Clement VIII.

Philip Romulus Neri was born in Florence on 21st July 1515 and baptized in the famous baptistery. He was the middle child of five born to Francesco Neri and Lucrezia da Mosciano. Both parents belonged to the middle class of poor gentry who for various reasons were less well off than their ancestors. Francesco Neri is said to have been a supporter of the Florentine republic and an admirer of the Dominican Friar Savonarola. He passed on his admiration to his son who was sent for his first lessons to the Dominican Fathers at San Marco where Fra Angelico had painted the cells with his gorgeous colours. In later life Philip used to say "all I have of good came to me from the Fathers of San Marco". He had two sisters Caterina and Elisabetta who survived infancy. His mother died when he was five and the three children were brought up by their stepgrandmother who had a special affection for Philip. His father lived to be eighty-two and both his sisters married. One of his nieces, a nun, was present at his canonisation. Philip was known to his friends and acquaintances as "Pippo buono — good little Philip" — which means that he was thought to be good company and agreeable as well as morally good.

TO ROME

When he was about eighteen, probably in 1533, Philip left Florence and never saw any of his family again, though he wrote occasionally to his sisters. The decision to leave may have been partly the result of the fall of the republic the previous year, when Alexander de Medici was installed as hereditary Grand Duke. Francesco Neri may have been in financial and political difficulties. Philip was sent to his father's cousin, Romolo Neri, usually referred to as Philip's 'uncle', who was in business at San Germano, the modern Cassino, and who it was hoped would make him his heir since he had no children. As a parting gift Francesco Neri gave his son a genealogical table of his noble descent—which was promptly torn up. This shows that Philip had already decided against a career in the world, where such a document, especially in the sixteenth century, would have been useful. Despite his gesture of detachment Philip kept to his dying day a seal with his family coat of arms, three gold stars on an azure ground.

Philip's 'uncle' was ready to make him his heir but he did not stay long with him. Romolo Neri was apparently well enough off to offer his young kinsman a secure future, though he was not really wealthy. Bacci in his 'Life' says that

Philip visited the famous Montagna Spaccata at the port of Gaeta. There in the fissure of a rock said to have been split at the moment of the Crucifixion, with the waves beating below, is a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Perhaps it was here that Philip received the call which changed his whole life: he must go to Rome as a poor pilgrim, to visit the tombs of the Apostles and Martyrs and to seek the will of God. This is one of many times when Philip showed his sensitive response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in prayer. No considerations of worldly prudence or human affection could make him change his mind.

He arrived in Rome in 1533 and never left the City for over sixty years. For the first year or two he lodged with a fellow countryman, Galleotto del Caccia, a customs official. Philip acted as tutor to his host's two small sons, one of whom became rector of a church near Florence and the other a Carthusian monk. His diet consisted of some rolls baked at the public oven, a few olives and some salad with his bread and an occasional egg. He very rarely ate meat, his wine was liberally diluted and he usually drank plain water from the well of the house. He slept in a little attic where the furniture consisted of a bed and some books. He hung his clothes on a line; they were plain but never ostentatiously shabby and always clean and neat.

Philip enrolled at the Roman university where he studied the 'humane sciences' and philosophy at the Sapienza, and theology at Sant' Agostino under the Augustinians. In later life Philip was able to discuss scholastic philosophy with learned men who were sometimes surprised by the range of his knowledge. It is recorded that he usually preferred to follow St Thomas Aquinas in disputed questions. After two or at the most three years of study he sold his books and gave the money to help poor students. There had been a large crucifix at Sant' Agostino which caused him to weep during the lectures. He decided to give himself to God in prayer.

Philip now became a familiar figure to the beggars who hung around the Roman churches. In order to find greater solitude he went out to the Catacombs of San Sebastian—the only ones known at that time—and often spent whole nights there in prayer among the tombs of the early Christians and martyrs. This semi-eremital life in the middle of Rome lasted for about ten years from the age of twenty-three to thirty-three. By some secret instinct of sanctity, Philip Neri in Rome went to pray every night in the catacombs. The Congregation of the Oratory which he later founded was a return to the charity and simplicity of the early Christian communities. These years which Philip spent in the Catacombs gave the Congregation its future shape and spirit.

PENTECOSTAL FIRE

Just before Whitsun (Pentecost) probably in the year 1544 Philip while still a layman was praying to the Holy Ghost in the Catacomb of San Sebastian. Suddenly he seemed to see a globe of fire which entered his mouth and sank down into his heart. At the same time he felt a fire of love which seemed to be a positive physical heat so that he had to throw himself on the ground and bare his breast to cool it. When he rose he was seized with a violent trembling, accompanied by an extraordinary sense of joy, and putting his hand to his heart, felt there a swelling as big as a man's fist. The details of this experience were confided by Philip in old age to his friend Cardinal Frederic Borromeo.

After Philip's death the cause of this swelling was discovered by the doctors. His heart was enlarged and the first two 'false' ribs [on the left side] had become detached from the cartilages which united them to the breast bone; at the point of fraction, the free ends, both ribs and cartilages, projected outwards towards the skin. A palpitation of the heart continued all his life when he was praying, speaking of divine things or administering the sacraments. The chair, bed or bench on which he was sitting would tremble and sometimes even the whole room. When he pressed his penitents to his heart they felt a wonderful consolation. Many found this a most effective way of being cured of temptations, especially against purity. As Mgr Knox says in a sermon "if St. Philip were suddenly to come into the room, one's first instinct would be to run to his heart". Benedict XIV who re-organised the rules for Canonisation decided that Philip's enlarged heart was caused by an aneurism. Ponnelle and Bordet in their 'Life' conclude that it was partly natural and partly supernatural. What is certain is that Philip himself and his penitents associated it with divine love. He was always reluctant to accept any supernatural phenomena either in himself or in others.

This experience of the Holy Ghost may have been the immediate preparation for his active apostolate. He now began to gather round him a circle of young men mainly drawn from the customs, banks and wine-bars, some of them no doubt Florentines like himself. Such was his winning manner that they did not resent being 'preached at' by a

layman. Indeed Philip never went in for that stern denouncing of vice or the gloomy prophecies of woe which were the stock-in-trade of street preachers, especially after the Sack of Rome in 1527. His was always a positive approach, showing the beauty of holiness, the attractiveness of virtue. One of his favourite greetings was “well, my brothers, when shall we begin to do good?” He soon discovered in himself an extraordinary power to influence other people. The young men followed his example in visiting the sick in the hospitals, making their beds, sweeping the floor, feeding them and speaking to them of the kingdom of God and their hope of heaven. This sort of work was of course necessary as well as edifying in 16th century Rome before the Welfare State provided a health service, and before the coming of nursing orders and special lay organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Philip also encouraged many young men to join religious orders though he never showed any inclination to do so himself. According to tradition he knew St Ignatius of Loyola and sent the first Italian to join the new Society of Jesus.

In 1548 with the help of his confessor, Persiano Rosa, Philip founded the Confraternity of the Holy Trinity, whose purpose was both spiritual and practical. Members met for prayer at the church of San Salvatore in Campo where the devotion of the Forty Hours of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was first introduced into Rome. Even as a layman Philip seems to have been frequently to Holy Communion. His intense Eucharistic devotion links him not only with the Catholic reformers of his own day but also with Fr Charles de Foucauld, the 20th century hermit of the Sahara, and the Little Brothers of Jesus who do an hour’s meditation daily before the Blessed Sacrament.

PHILIP THE PRIEST

He was now becoming quite well known in Rome and his confessor told him that he ought to be a priest. With considerable reluctance Philip agreed to this and received all the Orders within three months. He was ordained priest on 23rd May 1551 in the church of San Tomaso in Parione, being then thirty-five years old.

He went to live at San Girolamo della Carità, a small church opposite the English College, where St Jerome is said to have been visited by St Paula. Here he joined a community of priests to which his confessor already belonged and which was shortly to be headed by Buonsignore Cacciaguerra, a fervent promoter of frequent Communion. Philip now had a much wider field for his apostolate. He began at once to hear confessions, a work which was to occupy him for nearly forty-five years and was the main source of his influence. Like the Curé of Ars he had supernatural powers of clairvoyance so that he could read men’s hearts, tell their sins before they spoke and foretell the future. There are innumerable cases recorded in the Process of Canonisation, many of them too remarkable to have been invented. Before he became well known he used to make himself available for confessions from early morning until noon when he said Mass at a time when the church was almost empty so that his ecstatic devotion might be concealed as far as possible. Soon however penitents came in a never-ending stream which lasted until he died. Only extreme illness would make him give up this work. He said it was recreation for him even to sit in a confessional.

In ascetism Philip did not follow the extreme severity of the Desert Fathers, though he practised the traditional penance of the discipline on his flesh and lived very simply. He used to hold his fingers against his forehead and say that a man’s holiness lay in three fingers breadth. By this he meant that to discipline the intellect and will was much harder and more important than to discipline the body. He did not encourage others to use extreme forms of bodily mortification. One who asked him if he might wear a hair-shirt was told certainly, provided he wore it outside his clothes; he was called “Hair-shirt Bert” ever afterwards.

THE ORATORY

From about 1552 the year after his ordination Philip began to gather a few young men, at first about eight or ten, in his room after the midday meal. There they would talk of spiritual things in an informal way or read some spiritual book or life of a Saint. After the conversation they used to go for a walk together, perhaps to some church or convent, and some of them would go back again with Philip to San Girolamo for prayer in the evening. This is the real beginning of the Congregation of the Oratory. Many religious orders such as the Benedictines, Carmelites and Franciscans have Oblates or Tertiaries (Philip was a Franciscan Tertiary), Third Orders for people living in the world, who wish to associate themselves with the Order. They came later than the religious order to which they are attached. With the Oratory of St Philip however it is the other way round. It is the laymen whom Philip gathered round him who

were the Oratory to start with. When their number became too great for his room he built an “Oratory”, i.e., place for prayer, under the roof of San Girolamo for the meetings. That is the origin of the name which by association was later applied both to the Congregation and its Church.

Philip’s influence in Rome began to spread far and wide. He drew men from all walks of life, rich, poor, learned and simple. Stefano the shoemaker is one of the earliest whose name has come down to us. Within a few years he had some important friends and penitents including Prospero Crivelli, a banker, Gianbattista Salviati, a cousin of Catherine de Medici, Queen of France, and Anna Borromeo, sister of St Charles Borromeo. Above all there were Francesco Tarugi, and Caesar Baronius, both future members of the Congregation and later Cardinals. Through Tarugi, who was related to two Popes, Philip’s influence penetrated into the Papal Court.

By 1557 Philip often went about Rome accompanied by a large number of clerics and laymen. Pope Paul IV, who set up the Inquisition in Rome, was suspicious of the Oratory because of Philip’s connection with Marcantonio Colonna who was second in command of the Spanish army, then in the neighbourhood of Rome. Philip and twenty of his followers inspired by the example of St Francis Xavier were ready to offer themselves as missionaries and go to the East. He consulted the Cistercian monk Vincenzo Ghettoni at the monastery of Tre Fontane where St Paul was beheaded. The reply was the famous words: “Rome is to be your Indies”. His task was to re-convert Christians to Christianity.

SACRED MUSIC

The meetings at San Girolamo now assumed a more definite form with hymns, prayer and discourse. Laymen, especially Tarugi, preached informal sermons “on the book” — that is, taking a passage from scripture or some spiritual book or life of a Saint and then enlarging on it, explaining it and drawing some practical lesson from it. Church History was covered by Baronius who later published his work in the many volumes of the ‘Ecclesiastical Annals’. On feast days they went on a sort of religious picnic with singers and musicians to assist their devotions. Music played an important part in the Oratory from the beginning. Philip had a high opinion of its power to raise men’s hearts and minds to God. Anerio, Animuccia, and the great Palestrina were three composers associated with Philip; the latter is said to have been his penitent for a time. Later on Victoria stayed at the Chiesa Nuova before returning to Spain. The Pilgrimage of the Seven Churches at Carnival time before Lent and during Holy Week sometimes drew as many as two thousand people. This Pilgrimage which Philip either began or promoted starts at St Peter’s in the evening and ends at St. Mary Major the following day. It has continued intermittently down to the present day, until modern traffic conditions became too difficult for pedestrians.

In 1559 another storm of opposition was raised against the Oratory. The Cardinal-Vicar summoned Philip before him, suspended his faculties to hear confessions for a fortnight and forbade the exercises at the Oratory and the pilgrimage of the Seven Churches. He was accused of being an ambitious man who wanted to make a name for himself or start a new sect. His name was soon cleared by a Commission and his work was allowed to continue.

TRIALS

When the Florentines needed a new Rector for their national church they asked Philip to take charge of it. He refused but was forced to accept by a command of Pius IV, himself a Medici. Five of his disciples were ordained priest and went to St John’s, though Philip continued to live at San Girolamo. At St John’s the Congregation of the Oratory gradually evolved without any conscious design on Philip’s part. They had a rule of life and customs arose which later became part of the rule. Every day they went to San Girolamo until after ten years an Oratory was built for them at St John’s and the exercises were transferred to it.

Under the next Pope, St Pius V, there was a third crisis for the Oratory and some danger of the work being suppressed. Two Dominicans sent to listen to the sermons at the Oratory reported favourably and the danger was removed. The next Pope, Gregory XIII, was a personal friend of Philip’s and under him the Oratory was formally established. A disturbing incident at St John’s finally convinced Philip that the Congregation ought to have a church and house of its own in order to be independent. The Pope gave them Santa Maria in Vallicella (St Mary’s in the valley) and on 15th July, 1575 published a Brief setting up there a congregation of clerics and laymen living in

Community without vows. The small church was soon pulled down and the large and beautiful one built on the site is called even today the Chiesa Nuova, the 'new Church' (like New College at Oxford).

Philip remained at San Girolamo until 1583 when the Pope ordered him to join his sons at the Vallicella. The new church was opened in 1577, the Pope himself, St Charles Borromeo, Cardinals and Bishops all contributing to the expense of the building, as well as innumerable poor people.

During his last years Philip was given permission to say Mass in a little chapel next to his room. When he came to the 'Domine non sum dignus', those in the chapel withdrew, the server put out the candles and lighted a lamp and went out leaving the Saint alone with God. After two hours he would come back and knock on the door. If the Saint answered he came in, lighted the candles, and Philip finished the Mass in the usual way.

MIRACLES

The miracles and cures he worked seemed almost incessant. They included one case of temporarily restoring to life, Paolo, the son of his friend Fabrizio de Massimi in the presence of his family. In his humility Philip told Baronius that he had asked God not to work these wonders through him. He always made light of these things and did not regard them as necessary signs of holiness either in himself or others. Similarly he did not want to be regarded as the founder of the Oratory. He said the Holy Ghost was its real founder. Despite his denials, Philip did found a new Congregation in the Church, absolutely unique in its constitution, the free and democratic element perhaps owing something to his youthful admiration for the Florentine republic. This has developed into the Confederation of the Oratory, about sixty autonomous self-governing houses in many countries with the minimum of central organisation.

Philip himself had an indirect connection with England. He would often meet the students of the English College in the streets and greet them with the first line of the hymn of the Holy Innocents "Hail, budding Martyrs". Tradition says that they would go and ask his blessing before returning to England and probable martyrdom.

St Philip's love for Our Lady, the Mother of God, was remarkable even among the great saints of his time. He often spent whole nights talking to her—a fact which emerged when he was ill and thought no one was listening to him. He used to tell his sons "Be devout to Mary.... .believe me when I say there is no surer way of obtaining graces from God than the most holy Madonna". One of his favourite prayers was a short version of the Hail Mary, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me" or just "Virgin and Mother". Our Lady appeared to him in a vision and cured him of a serious illness in 1594.

He was ill again in the following year and said his last Mass on 25th May, the feast of Corpus Christi. When he reached the Gloria he sang it all through, something which, says Bacci, was most unusual with him. He went to bed that night apparently in good health but he himself seems to have known exactly when he would die. In the early hours of 26th May he had a severe haemorrhage and died peacefully sitting on his bed surrounded by his sons. He is buried under the altar in his chapel in the Chiesa Nuova, and was canonised with Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Isidore the farmer and Teresa of Avila, on 12th March 1622.

What sort of man was Philip Neri? No artist ever succeeded in catching the expression of his eyes, though both Guido Reni and Francisco Guercino, neither of them working from life, have shown us something of his beautiful hands which in old age were almost transparent like alabaster and gave out a supernatural perfume. The spirit so possessed his body that he was able to smell sin, especially sins of the flesh. He was of medium height, well made and active, latterly with white hair and beard, with clear forehead and straight nose. A Florentine of the high Renaissance, Philip moved with unselfconscious ease in a world of great art—the world of Michelangelo and Palestrina. He was convinced that holiness was within the reach of busy men and women, married or single, living active lives in a city. His means to this end were the simple ones of prayer, spiritual reading, frequent confession and communion, listening to informal sermons and sacred music. He introduced the practice of prayer into many of the leading families of Rome and led many of his penitents to the heights of holiness. As Meriol Trevor points out in her 'Life', many of the Protestant reformers were ex-religious, whereas a good number of the Catholic reformers were formerly men of the world such as Francesco Tarugi. Philip would not have been in the slightest bit surprised at a stockbroker becoming a priest: he who reformed the Roman Curia would know that sanctity could flourish on the Stock Exchange. He had something of the spirit of a Desert Father in the midst of Renaissance Rome: a hermit who, as he told one of his

penitents, had never left the world. With him the spirit of detachment went hand in hand with complete involvement.

PATRON OF CHRISTIAN JOY

Cardinal Newman who brought the Oratory to England in 1848 calls Philip ‘man of primitive times’. One might also call him ‘man of the Holy Ghost’ or ‘patron of Christian joy’. The two really go together since Philip’s own temperament seems to have been changed and moulded by prayer. As a boy he appears to have been rather serious-minded, the later outburst of joy must be attributed directly to the Holy Ghost who never seems to have left him in those moods of dryness and aridity experienced by so many mystics. Many of his famous jokes were partly designed to conceal his holiness from casual observers. He would go about with half his beard shaved off or dance in public, or have a funny book read to him when some important Polish nobles came to visit ‘the Saint’. Where ordinary priests need to concentrate before saying Mass, Philip sometimes needed jokes in order to moderate his almost uncontrollable absorption in God.

His direction of others aimed at undermining pride and self-importance—Renaissance vices which flourish in every age—and leaving them free, humble, mature and obedient to the Holy Ghost. As Father Faber says “he had a keen appreciation of the growing subjectivity of the modern mind” and knew how to deal with it. He had a marked preference for people with a happy disposition and even went so far as to say that they had a better chance than others of getting to heaven. His purely spiritual methods did more to revive religion in the capital of Christendom than the measures of Paul IV. St. Philip Neri has his niche in St. Peter’s as the founder of the Oratory and his place in Church history as the Apostle of Rome.
