

The Oratorian Charism

Reformation Rome

Many movements begin with the vision of a charismatic figure. The Oratory is no exception. In order to understand the Oratory's unique character and contribution to the life of the Church, we need to understand its founder – St. Philip Neri (1515-1595).

Philip came to Rome from Florence in 1534: a date that places him in the center of one of the most turbulent times in the history of Catholicism. The Council of Trent, the Battle of Lepanto and the Reformation were among the momentous events of his day. Philip lived in Rome when the Church was deeply embattled. There is near unanimous agreement that the Church had deep-seated problems and was in need of significant reform. Martin Luther had posted his 95 theses on the doors of the University Chapel at Wittenberg in 1517. He became the figurehead of those reforms that split in two the Church in Europe. Many of Luther's concerns about the fidelity of the Roman Church to the founding charter of Jesus and the early Church found an unlikely echo with Philip's own life and mission in Rome. Philip's little reformation helped renew the Church from within and thus preserve the vitality of the Roman Church. A drop out from school and business, a joyous, somewhat eccentric and loveable prankster, he was a most unlikely reformer and his method of reform, if we can call it that, was equally improbable.

Like Luther he shared a love and desire for the greater accessibility of the Scriptures, especially by the laity. He promoted the study of Church history and a return to the vital simplicity of the early Church as found in the Acts of the Apostles. Philip's prayer group used the more accessible vernacular rather than the Ecclesiastical Latin that was common in his day for instruction and preaching. But as Luther sought structural reform Philip sought the path of inner conversion. As Luther went out, Philip went within. As Luther was swept up into political reform with European princes eager to disentangle their constituencies from the control of the powerful Papacy, Philip instead insisted on personal reformation, and the conversion of hearts that occurs when individuals come together in order to live the simple joy of the Gospel. It was this mix of fidelity and joy that eventually helped bring even members of the Medici controlled College of Cardinals and Roman Curia into Philip's circle of easy influence. The famous English Oratorian, Cardinal John Henry Newman, coined the phrase: "Cor ad cor loquitur" (heart speaks to heart) to summarize this distinctively Philippian characteristic

As serious and political as Luther's efforts for reform became Philip's were by comparison domestic and familiar. Luther inadvertently set in motion a series of battles that raged across Europe dividing the Catholic South from a Protestant North. Philip led pilgrimages to Rome's major churches, which turned, into picnics that saw the Pope mingling with Philip's beloved

street people. Joy and practical charity seemed to follow wherever Philip went. Unlike Luther, Philip Neri was not a university professor, steeped in scripture, history and theology. His theological training was adequate but hardly extensive. There are stories of Philip sitting in class lost in contemplative prayer gazing at the crucifix above the professor's head rather than paying attention to the eminent academic's erudition. Philip reluctantly became a priest at the age of 36. He valued the role of the layperson in the Church and felt unworthy of the sacrament of ordination. Philip felt he learnt more attending to the sick pilgrims in the hospitals and visiting with people in the streets of Rome than he did in a classroom. And it was this very practical charity that he encouraged again and again in all who came to him for spiritual direction.

It was vitally important to Philip that those concerns and resulting actions found voice and form within the Church of Rome. To this day St. Philip is called the Apostle of Rome, so effective was his reform from within. When you consider that Ss. Peter and Paul could also lay claim to the title of Apostle of Rome, you can glimpse something of the power of Philip's joyous and practical Christianity. Some claim that in fact he was the one to fully convert the souls of Roman people to Christianity.

Philip's Early Days in Rome

Philip was just a young man of 19 when he came to Rome. A dropout from school and business, he wasted no time learning how to pray and live the ascetical life of a contemplative. By the time he was

21 he had begun to live as a hermit, sleeping in one of the many churches of Rome. He loved solitude and often spent nights alone in the then recently rediscovered catacombs on the outskirts of the papal city. As the evening sun was setting Philip could be seen walking out of Rome along the Via Apia Antica to take up his nightly vigil at the catacomb of San Sebastiano. It was during one of these all-night vigils that Philip experienced a profound conversion. Only towards the end of his life did he reveal that he felt the Holy Spirit descend upon him as a ball of flame, entering his mouth and lodging in his heart. Philip attributed to this experience his burning love of God. Ever afterwards he complained of being hot and would often be seen with the top buttons of his cassock open.

As a result of this defining spiritual experience, Philip was on fire with the love of God and his neighbors, especially the young and the neglected. It is little wonder therefore that a flaming heart became the symbol of this most human of saints. Philip's humanness is one of his defining attributes. A favorite practice of his was to console the sad and fearful by drawing their heads to rest on his chest, saying as he did so, that this was only a small taste of the fire of God's love for them. Thus they had no need to be sad or afraid. His influence was primarily by showing people that they were loved and they themselves could love. Those who fell under St. Philip's easy influence soon learnt to appreciate their own goodness, and the beauty of virtue, especially in adversity.

Philip preached as effectively in this way as many have from a pulpit. Indeed, even when Philip did preach in Church he did not use the ornate and dramatic style that was customary in his day, but rather he spoke in a more familiar and practical way. He encouraged the same style among the first Oratorians and it remains a distinctive characteristic of his sons and daughters even today. Philip's genius was ever to be simple. In spite of his formidable spiritual life Philip's biographers say he was a happy person, good humored and kind. He was approachable and outgoing; people liked being in his company, and he was often seen walking the streets of his neighborhood engaging in that distinctively light-hearted and yet profound banter that was his custom.

The Founding of the Oratory

Philip's appealing personality eventually attracted a group of like-minded laymen. At first they met in his private rooms at the church of San Giralamo and then in a small prayer room (an oratory) above the nave of the church. With Philip they shared the scriptures and took turns preaching to and for each other. They used popular musical forms and adapted them to form sacred songs. The music gave rise to such composers as Palestrina and Vittoria. In time the numbers of people who came to his meetings grew so large that they were conducted outdoors.

In fair weather Philip would lead thousands on pilgrimages to the major churches of Rome. Accompanied by music, a break at mid-day for lunch, and Philip's characteristic light-hearted joy and

distrust of undue formality, these pilgrimages of prayer and fellowship were often referred to as Philip's picnics. It was not uncommon to see the Pope in the crowd of picnickers enjoying the children's plays that were another feature of the day's proceedings. And of course, the needy would be cared for along the way. By means of music, or a picnic, or Philip's familiar style of presenting the message of the Gospel, he drew people to the Church, as he liked to say, like nectar draws the bee to the flower. Philip saw the mutual benefit for both the Church and the devotee.

The son of the Republic of Florence brought democratic ideas to the practice of Catholicism in imperial Rome. Perhaps Philip had resisted becoming a priest for so long because the hierarchical aspect of ordination would be unavoidable. Even so, within the very structures that he approved for the governance of the Congregation of the Oratory he insisted on a unique parity between brothers and priests, something quite unheard of in his day. The Provost, the head of the Congregation, must be elected by the members, and must govern as first among equals, not as supreme ruler ordering about others at his pleasure. The Provost is to lead like Philip: from strength derived from lived experience, not by power gained from the mere delegation of authority. Those who formed the Oratory are to form a partnership of life in community that respects and utilizes the talents and experience of each. No decisions about the life of all the members were to be made without their approval. The chief authority of the Oratory resides in its

members. As a result each of the nearly 80 Oratories scattered through out the world today, from Monterey, California to Ooutshoorn, South Africa, has developed varied and distinctive ministries.

From Difficult Times and Tensions: Joy

But it would be a mistake to think that Philip had an easy time of it in Rome. Indeed the Oratory was sufficiently different and successful to be a cause of some intense suspicion. Twice Church authorities suspended Philip's activities at the Oratory and both times he is said to have suffered it quietly, even joyfully. Philip also had to endure the suspicion of others because of the success of his Oratory. Among the complaints against him where that he could not be serious enough because there was too much laughter heard in his church; that he must be watering-down doctrine because the crowds were too big; and, that the involvement of the laity and the emphasis on Scripture were too Protestant. Philip appears to have encouraged others to think less of him by constantly "playing the fool." Once, when two fashionable ladies came to "see the saint" he appeared with half his beard shaven. At other times he wore funny hats and dressed in unusually unfashionable ways. He made a habit of humbling himself and avoiding celebrity. He said an Oratorian should have a love of obscurity and avoid titles and honors.

Philip's example of fidelity had at its heart a tension. On the one hand he strove to remain faithful to Church tradition and magisterial authority. On the other he encouraged following the spirit of the early

Gospel as it took shape in his own heart and as it blew through the lives of those he sought to serve within his small neighborhood in Rome. Showing us how to hold these two hands together is perhaps his greatest legacy. For the tension between the dynamic and vital foundations of faith in God's love revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth (and born again in every Christian and Christian community that is set afire anew) and the need for institutional stability, are ever the creative forces that define Catholicism. Avoiding the opposite dangers of either falling into mere bureaucratic survival or into unstructured license is the creative tension that produces authentic discipleship.

Because Philip lived the reality of discipleship by being both faithful to the traditions of the Church and open to the spirit of his time, he could not only preach about the idea of holiness, he could in fact speak about it from his own lived experience. No doubt, this was a large part of his appeal. He was well known for his practical holiness. In fact, his brother Oratorians had to hide his body when he died because there were so many clamoring for a relic of "The Saint of Joy."

The Middle Way of Reform

Philip was part of the "Counter-Reformation" effort of the Roman Church to earnestly clean up many of the inadequacies Luther and others targeted. But the Protestant revolt also had the effect of making some within the Church hierarchy insist on very clear and definite boundaries to what was, and what was not, orthodox belief and practice. Pope Pius V, who had

previously been the Chief Inquisitor, was one of the Popes who reigned in Rome during Philip's lifetime. As mentioned, Philip's activities came under investigation twice during this period, but each time he was cleared. To put it simply there was a tension between the voices that seem to insist on absolutely no change and those who appeared to their opponents to want to change everything. Philip managed to steer a middle path ("via media") between these shores taking on the best of both movements while avoiding the respective pitfalls. He did so by following an incarnational approach that emphasized the personalized values, which emanate from a converted (loving) heart. His example was one of living the Gospel oneself so that others would be attracted to do the same. His promotion of the gifts and ministry of lay Oratorians was a way to enrich and renew the Church from within. Philip helped bring about reforms within the Church by adopting the middle way. Like the very Son of God, who is both fully human and fully divine, who bridges both heaven and earth, the Christian way tries to hold together the realities of the whole. Philip's motto could well have been "Virtus in medio stat" (Virtue stands in the middle).

Philip's reforms, therefore, were more by personal conversion than by any real programmatic or significant structural change. Philip was very responsive to the hearts of others. He is said to have been able to listen so well to those who came to him for the Sacrament of Penance that he was able to ask just the right questions that encouraged the penitent to be even more honest. This confessional

technique arose not from a desire to be purient but the intention of bringing the penitent even more healing and peace.

Practical Charity

Philip's love and concern was not just spiritual. He lived and preached a consistent practice of practical charity. He was often heard to say: "When shall we begin to do good?" One story recalls how he came into church to once again find a rich man on his knees, head bowed reverently, praying piously. Philip's response was to send the man to the hospital to take care of the sick. "God is pleased with your prayers," Philip said, "but he would be even more pleased with your care of his poor and needy." The care of the sick and hospitalized, and attending to the needs of the many pilgrims to Rome, (caring for as many as 500 a day) were activities he participated in and encouraged in others. The life he lived was one of deep personal prayer and a sustained care for the needy. The simplicity of his personal life-style, his participation in communal prayer based on reflection on the scriptures, saints and Church history were the structures of his own life and the building blocks he established for the Oratory.

Emphasis on the Laity

For Philip the life of the Oratory was about the work of worship and charity, not about status or title. He is said to have been named a cardinal twice and both times to have playfully thrown away the red hat that was given to him. Perhaps because of his long and dedicated life as a layman going about the business

of charity and prayer and his reluctance to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Philip built within the structure of the Oratory a collaborative and representative constitution. Unlike some other religious orders in the Catholic Church, where the laity are the “third order” (after the priests – first order – and the religious brothers and sisters – the second order), in the Oratory the laity are the first, and the priests and brothers exist only to serve the laity who are therefore rightly the first order.

Some have said that Philip’s emphasis on the laity put him 400 years ahead of his time. But Newman also emphasized this aspect of Church tradition in nineteenth-century England. The role of the laity in his ministry and work was also an authentic expression of Catholicity. It is little surprise then that one of Newman’s most famous works is “On Consulting the Laity on Matters of Doctrine.” It remains to this day an important work in the area. There is also more than an echo of Philip in another of Newman’s seminal works “On the Development of Doctrine,” for he too sought means to preserve fidelity to the deposit of faith while being responsive to the needs of his day. Perhaps we can see in Newman’s extraordinarily productive correspondence a continuation of Philip’s own highly personal approach to ministry. “Each one,” Philip said, “has a particular gift which he must follow and this is a matter to which he must pay great attention.”

The Oratory eventually enjoyed considerable success, even in Philip’s day. A friend and contemporary of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of

the Jesuits, Philip resisted strenuously attempts to expand the Oratory by turning it into another international religious order. He did not stop other Oratories from forming but he did ensure that each remained independent and autonomous; for he believed strongly that an Oratory should be a home (or as he said a “nido” – a nest) rather than just a place where priests and brothers lived. The community of familiar faces, as Newman put it, was to be the hallmark of the Oratorians’ religious life. An Oratorian becomes an Oratorian not so much by joining an organized congregation but by living with a particular group of people in a particular place for life. Philip, therefore, insisted that Oratorians not take religious vows as others do. He felt that if someone did not want to stay an Oratorian then he should be free to leave: the only bond for them should be the bond of mutual charity and affection. Such a family structure is not possible if the numbers within the community are too large. While this insistence on smallness tends to make the Oratory’s existence somewhat fragile it also preserves its ability to heal and vitalize community life. There is no moving away from a problem in an Oratory; the members must learn to solve their problems together.

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