



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

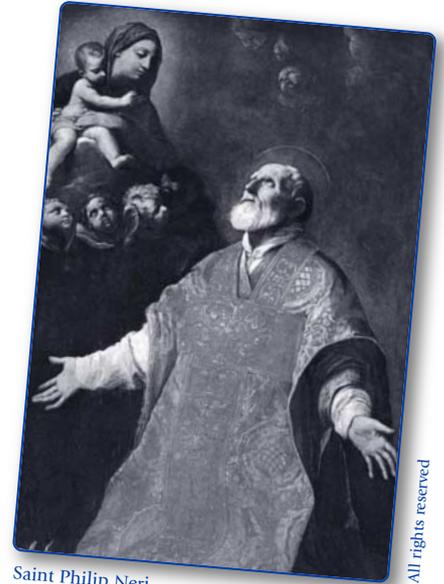
Letter of September 8, 2012,  
Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin MARY

*Dear Friends,*

**I**T is the laws of the Gospel and the commandments of Christ that lead to joy and happiness: this is the truth proclaimed by Saint Philip Neri to the young people he met in his daily apostolate. His was a message dictated by the intimate experience he had of God especially in prayer." (Blessed John Paul II, October 7, 1994, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the saint's death). Few men have left as strong, deep, and lasting a stamp on the city of Rome as did Philip Neri, "God's Fool." Although he never held an important position in the Church, his considerable personal influence is still discernible today.

Philip was born in Florence, Tuscany, on July 21, 1515, the second in a family of four children. His father, Francesco, was a notary. His mother, Lucrezia, died when he was five. Her place in the household was soon taken by Alessandra, Francesco's second wife, who enveloped the child with special tenderness. At the time, Florence was a capital for arts and banking, spreading its influence over a great distance. Already at a very early age, Philip was noted for his joyful and agreeable nature, and often visited the Dominican Fathers in the Convent of Saint Mark. There he received a double influence—that of artistic beauty, thanks to the murals by Blessed Fra Angelico on the walls, and that of Savonarola, the Dominican who, by his preaching, had stirred up the city some thirty years earlier. From this Philip retained a burning love for JESUS and the call to conversion, but, far from sharing Savonarola's impetuosity, he showed balance and gentleness.

After the sack of Rome by the troops of Charles V in 1527, followed by the sack of Florence in 1530, Philip was sent to stay with a relative who had made a fortune in textiles. There his life became filled with calculations on profitability of the cloth and wool trade, in which only gain mattered. Soon the young man became troubled, asking himself how one could legitimately amass so much money when there were so many poor. He decided to leave his generous benefactor to go to Rome, to lead a life more in keeping with the Gospel. There he was received by a fellow Florentine, the customs director. He became the tutor to his host's two sons, leading a very ascetic life, living on olives, bread, and water. Rome was recovering with difficulty from the devastation wrought by the terrible sack of 1527. It was considered a city of ill repute, yet it was home to spiritual movements that portended the renaissance of religious life. Philip took advantage of the proximity of the



Saint Philip Neri

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Sapienza, the pontifical university in Rome, to study philosophy and theology, not according to a systematic program, but deepening his understanding in areas that would be most useful in helping those who would later turn to him.

## Fire of charity

**T**he young man often went to the catacomb of Saint Sebastian at night to pray. There, on the eve of Pentecost 1544, the Holy Spirit gave him an exceptional grace—he felt an intense fire of charity in his heart, and saw a globe of flame pass through his lips. He felt this flame reach his heart and make it vibrate violently. This grace would mark him the rest of his life, for his heart had grown larger with divine love. During a medical visit for bronchitis, the doctor was astonished to observe that his ribs had been split open by the physical enlargement of his heart. Thereafter, the Lord would often console Philip with ecstasies and supernatural gifts.

Philip drew from his long hours of prayer an intense love of neighbor, which led him to visit hospitals and acquire solid nursing skills. At the time, nursing was a quasi-heroic ministry, considering the condition of institutions providing care to the poor. However, the young man soon learned that, above all, the sick need to feel loved. He also cared for poor and sick pilgrims who arrived in Rome, opening a shelter for them with his confessor, Persiano Rosa. Soon, he was also receiving at the shelter convalescents who, as soon as their condition began to improve, were thrown out of the hospitals to

make room for others, and who often found themselves in the streets, seriously risking relapse. This activity developed so much that in 1548, he founded the "Confraternity of the Trinity for Pilgrims".

### **The hour of doing good**

**P**hilip Neri frequently met with Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions, especially Saint Francis Xavier. At one point, he even considered joining them. Thanks to his influence, the Eucharistic devotion known as the "Forty Hours," a time of adoration in reparation for the outrages of the "Carnival" celebrations, was introduced in Rome. He helped organize groups of adorers, and exhorted those who finished their time of prayer, saying, "Go, the hour of prayer is over, but not that of doing good."

Convinced by his confessor that he should become a priest, despite the resistance that arose from his humility, Philip was ordained on May 23, 1551, at the age of thirty-five. Aware of his unworthiness, he delayed the celebration of his first Mass, but he gradually began to understand the Holy Sacrifice as a divine joy, and the most sublime act a man can accomplish. However, as his ecstasies and levitations happened more and more frequently, he avoided celebrating the Mass in public. On the other hand, administering the sacrament of Penance made his ministry to souls much more fruitful. In 1551, he went to live in the community of priests of San Girolamo della Carità. From dawn to noon, he heard confessions in the church. Then he celebrated the Holy Mass, and resumed hearing confessions in his room. He knew how to put his penitents at ease and make them feel his benevolence and priestly charity right away, speaking to each on the Lord's behalf and recommending frequent Communion. They left feeling relieved and comforted, and the number of his followers continually grew. But his influence drew persecutions and slander, at which times, a great distress and very intense suffering enveloped him, at the thought that his detractors were keeping him from doing good. "Oh JESUS," he said in his prayer, "I have never ceased asking You for the virtue of patience, why do You not grant it to me? Why are You allowing me to be faced with so many opportunities for anxiety, anger, impatience?" His request was justified, for, as Saint Teresa of Avila emphasized in a famous poem, "Patience obtains all things."

Philip Neri gathered young people in cenacles. He had a genius for explaining difficult things, but he also knew how to get his listeners to participate in the conversation. His humor, sometimes daring, gained him the respect of many curious youth, who were soon swept in by his burning faith. One day, a student was recounting his dreams and ambitions to him, and the saint kept responding with a single question, always the same: "And then?" The young man ended by seeing the emptiness of his plans, when weighed in the balance of eternity.

In his message for Lent 2012, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "I would like to mention an aspect of the Christian life, which I believe has been quite forgotten: fraternal correction in view of eternal salvation. Today, in general, we are very sensitive to the idea of charity and caring about the physical and material well-being of others, but almost completely silent about our spiritual responsibility towards our brothers and sisters. ... This [is] not the case in ... those communities that are truly mature in faith, those which are concerned not only for the physical health of their brothers and sisters, but also for their spiritual health and ultimate destiny."

### **Gathered in His Name**

**D**uring the meetings for youth, Holy Scripture was discussed, above all the Gospel of Saint John, and also spiritual authors such as Saint John Cassian, Saint Gertrude, etc. Each could freely express his thoughts on the passage that had been read, under Philip's supervision. Philip was convinced that the Holy Spirit was very active in these meetings, for JESUS promised *where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them* (Mt. 18:20). Bit by bit, these youth were formed in the spiritual life, which promised enthusiasm and renewal of hearts. This was the birth of the "Oratory." This term at first referred to the place where they met for prayer, then the group of those who regularly attended, named the "Oratorians." The meetings were comprised of two sessions, one of prayer and the other of reflection in four areas—Church history, the lives of the saints, questions on the moral life, and lastly, prayer and its difficulties. The young men themselves prepared short expositions. Philip wanted them to talk about concrete realities, illustrated by experiences taken from the lives of the saints or the history of the Church. After the meetings, he led his disciples on a visit to a church or hospital. Then they all met somewhere outdoors, for instance on the Janiculum, where musical relaxation soon turned into real concerts, thanks to the participation of musicians such as Palestrina and members of the pontifical choir. This first rate music in turn attracted others. Convinced that beauty leads to good, Philip Neri included art in his educational program, promoting initiatives that could lead to truth and good.

Among the noted personages who had confidence in Philip was Giovanni Battista Salviati, a distant cousin of Queen Catherine de' Medici. Salviati converted and went from great pomp to extreme humility. The saint had to intervene to dissuade him from seeking out too many humiliations.

Cesare Baronius was still quite young when he joined the Oratory in 1557. Discerning the caliber of his soul, Philip subjected him to a series of trials that would gain him patience and humility. Then, with a plan to develop apologetics to refute the Protestant version of history, he directed him to study Church history. In this he would excel, most notably in his *Ecclesiastical Annals*, a

monumental work that eventually became one of the foundations of the modern science of Church history. Later on, he would be made a cardinal.

Gabriele Tana, a young man stricken with tuberculosis, rebelled against the disease. He experienced temptations to despair and passed through a period of spiritual desert with diabolical visions. Philip restored peace to his soul. The young man regained his serenity and, at the moment of death, showed great joy. Philip Neri was often called to the bedside of the dying. His presence had a strong effect, and miraculous healings frequently occurred. He was constantly visiting the sick with his disciples, and he sent his young followers to beg for alms for the poor at the doors of churches, a particularly difficult task for gentlemen dressed in the latest fashions.

### Recollection and joy

In 1559, Philip inaugurated pilgrimages to the seven major basilicas in Rome, in a spirit of penance. The atmosphere was one of recollection and spiritual joy. At the beginning, about thirty young people participated in this pilgrimage, but later on, there would be hundreds, even thousands. The day before, they would begin by visiting Saint Peter's. The following day, they would begin at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, then go on to the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian, then to Saint John Lateran, Holy Cross in Jerusalem, and Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls, finishing at Saint MARY Major. During this period, controversy about the works of Savonarola reappeared, and some wanted his writings to be condemned. Philip contributed to the abandonment of this plan, but in taking his position he drew attention to himself, and made himself suspect in the eyes of those who disapproved of Savonarola. The Cardinal Vicar (i.e., the Pope's vicar for the diocese of Rome) intervened and, fearing that the Oratory's great processions would degenerate into riots, he forbade Philip from organizing meetings or hearing confession for two weeks. The saint submitted, and dissuaded his followers from protesting against the decisions of the ecclesiastical authority: "For me, following the orders of my superiors has always been the most important thing, and I am happy to obey." When the Cardinal Vicar suddenly died, all the sanctions were lifted.

It sometimes happens that the Church, in the person of her ministers, makes her children suffer. In such circumstances, the saints know to remain faithful to her. Faith reminds them that "in Christ our Lord, the bridegroom, and in His spouse the Church, there is but a single spirit, which governs and rules us for the salvation of our souls. And it is by the same Spirit and the same Lord who gave the Ten Commandments that our holy Mother Church is ruled and governed" (*Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, no. 365).

A delegation of Florentines, his fellow countrymen, asked Philip Neri to take charge of the church of Saint John of the Florentines, on the banks of the Tiber. An

Oratory community was established there. It was at this time that the community life of the Oratory priests was formed. Overwhelmed by those who were coming to him, the founder had, in fact, invited some of his most long-standing disciples to receive Orders as well, so as to dedicate themselves to the faithful of the Oratory. He did not give them a Rule—his spiritual direction, supplemented with several simple common-sense directions that reflected a profound understanding of the heart of man, took its place.

### His taste criticized

In 1567, under Pope Saint Pius V, a secret plot was on the brink of leading to the suppression of the Oratory. Saint Charles Borromeo, at the time the Archbishop of Milan, managed to save the foundation. Two Dominicans who had come, on the Pope's order, to listen to Philip's sermons were so satisfied and edified by them that after the end of their mission, they continued to come to hear them. Seven years later, a young man who had been expelled from the Oratory because of his misconduct launched a campaign of slander. The founder's taste for public performances and jokes, two of his favorite means of apostolate, were criticized. This pained Philip; the persecutions against him always deeply affected him. After Saint Pius V's death, the new Pope, Gregory XIII, entrusted to the Oratory a little dilapidated church dedicated to MARY, Santa Maria in Vallicella. The need to completely reconstruct the church soon became apparent. The architect was frightened by the plans: "How can we make such a big church?" But while digging in the spot the saint pointed out, a solid wall was found, all ready to serve as a foundation.

In 1575, the Oratory was officially established by the Pope, and in 1577, the founder was elected as its first Superior General. Postulants flocked in. Philip did not want to see the Oratory spread outside Rome. Nevertheless, independent foundations of Oratories were established in San Severino, Milan, Padua, etc., taking the house in Rome as their model, but without being subject to it. However, in 1586, the plenary assembly of Oratorians expressed its support for a foundation in Naples. Later on, this foundation would evolve towards a more regulated religious life, in contrast to the Oratory in Rome, which would maintain the informal style the founder desired.

In March 1583, fourteen-year-old Paolo Massimo, son of a noble family, fell gravely ill. Philip visited him every day. As he entered his death agony, the teenager sent for Philip. Arriving after the youth had died, the saint clasped him to his chest, began to pray, and called out his name twice. The child opened his eyes. Philip asked him if he preferred to live or die. The child clearly replied that he preferred to die. "Go!" Philip told him, "be blessed, and pray for me," and Paolo died. Still today, every year on March 16<sup>th</sup>, the event is celebrated at the Palazzo Massimo, close to the Piazza Navone. This

resurrection and extraordinary cures were soon well-known in the city, and contributed to Philip Neri's reputation as a saint. Philip invented all sorts of eccentricities to try to disabuse them of this notion. He was delighted when someone said of him: "Look at this old fool!" To keep both companions and penitents from pride, he would prescribe certain humbling tasks. In 1590, he resisted the newly-elected Pope Gregory XIV's attempt to make him a cardinal.

Philip Neri attached great importance to the sacraments. "Confessors," he said, "must make their penitents feel some of the tenderness of God's love... Always strive to bring sinners to Christ by your kindness and your love... Strive to make them understand God's love, which alone is truly capable of accomplishing great things." Christ's love was the foundation of the saint's apostolate, which was characterized by friendliness and sweetness. He warmly welcomed all those who came to him, knew how to listen to them, to rejoice with those who were joyful, and to grieve with those who wept. A depressive nun declared herself lost. Philip asserted, "I tell you, you are destined for Heaven, and I will prove it to you. Tell me, who did Christ die for?"—"For sinners."—"Exactly. And who are you?"—"A sinner."—"Therefore Heaven is for you, since you regret your sins." For him, humility was paired with love. "Above all, one must be very humble," he often repeated to his disciples. He knew that, in the spiritual life, "one descends when one raises oneself up [by pride], and one ascends by humility" (*Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 7). His goal was the sanctification of all: "Those who live in the world," he declared, "must strive to attain sanctity in their own homes. A life at court, a trade, or work is not an obstacle for one who wishes to serve God."

### **"I know what I am saying!"**

**H**is health deteriorating more and more, Philip Neri resigned from his position as Superior in

This saint of joy lived during a difficult period in the history of the Church (moral laxity of many members of the clergy, the Protestant Reformation, and political upheavals), but he teaches us that the Church, founded on Peter (cf. Mt. 16:18), never ceases to hold the promises of eternal life.

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
— o.s.b.

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