

Saint Philip Neri (1515-1595)

26 May 2004

Sermon preached at the Toronto Oratory

When the Father Provost invited me to this feast-day celebration, his letter included a reference to the man whom we honor today. “Saint Philip Neri,” wrote Father Hilbert, “used to say that whatever good there was in him could be attributed to the Dominicans at San Marco in his native Florence” This genial enticement from the Oratory made me think of another Florentine, Blessed John Dominici da Banchini (1356-1419), a fourteenth-century Dominican priest who promoted the reform movement that eventually became associated with San Marco. This *convento* or priory was founded in 1436 by Saint Antoninus (1389-1459), later archbishop of Florence, and was home to the celebrated artist, Blessed John of Fiesole (1395/1400-1455), better known as Fra Angelico, who died in 1455. The young Philip Neri would have seen the frescoes of Fra Angelico that visitors still may admire on the walls of what today is a state-operated museum.

Philip absorbed the spiritual elan that infused even the walls of San Marco. But it was not only Angelico’s ethereal representations of heavenly mysteries that captured the attention of Filippo Romolo Neri. He also fixed his gaze on the stark portrait of Jerome Savanarola (1452-1498), a Dominican friar who had been publically executed in 1498. Dominicans, I should observe, do better at starting reforms than sustaining them. Opinion remains divided on Savanarola’s place among the saints. In any case, you will understand my surprise to discover that Philip Neri, when he had settled in Rome, kept in his room a picture of Savanarola, and that “it was said that he himself had painted a halo around his head.”¹ Philip, we may assume,

admired two qualities of this, in the last analysis, wayward friar: Savanarola's attention to Sacred Scripture, the perennial source of authentic renewal, and his commitment to a holy mission, the requisite trait of any reformer.

So while I acknowledge Father Hilbert's artfulness, I especially want to express my gratitude to the Fathers of the Toronto Oratory for their kind invitation to preach on the day when the universal Church honors the memory of Saint Philip Neri. You have prompted me to think deeply about reform in the Church, especially between 1480 and 1620, roughly from the preaching of Savanarola to the death of Saint Francis de Sales. The latter's foundation of an Oratory in the Savoyard town of Thonon marks an important moment in the diffusion of Philip Neri's worldwide mission.²

I

Although born a Florentine, it is impossible to separate Philip Neri from Rome. There our saint lived out his consecrations, first as layman and then as priest. During the nearly sixty years that he made the Eternal City his earthly dwelling place, Philip Neri survived under the reigns of twelve Popes. Those familiar with his life will agree that I have chosen my verb carefully. One of these supreme pontiffs, the sixth in number, was Michael Gishlieri (1504-1572), the Dominican Pope Saint Pius V, who among other accomplishments enforced on bishops the decrees of the Council of Trent.

It took a period of time, so it seems, until Pope Pius V came fully to appreciate Philip's distinctive approach to evangelization. The two men had experienced different formation backgrounds, as one today would say. Our saint's biographers report that Philip met with certain testings during the six-year reign of a Pope who himself was regarded as an ecclesial reformer. It

is suspected, for example, that Pius V sent several priests to listen in on what was being preached at San Girolamo. And what to think about those visits to the prison of the Inquisition? Was Philip comforting heretics? Dominicans, as some may surmise, were busy flushing them out. Then there was Philip's public objection to the forced conscription of the Gypsies. Here perspective is important. Pius, a secular as well as spiritual sovereign, needed to man galleys against the Turks, whereas Filippone ("Ecco Filippone") felt concern for those sufferings in the alleyways of Rome.

Providence intervened in the moderating influence of Cardinal Charles Borromeo, "artisan exemplaire" of the Reform.³ He had been instrumental in the election of Pius in January of 1566, and was able to reconcile the classical approach to reform favored by the zealous Dominican Pope with the originality practiced by the equally zealous Philip Neri. No cause for surprise. The saints characteristically call upon God, and receive "the spirit of wisdom" (Wis 7:7). This gift of the Holy Spirit, we are told, fosters communion: "She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Wis 8:1).

In God's plan, tradition and innovation complement each other. As Our Blessed Lord himself instructs, "every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt 13: 52). Philip Neri and Pius V exhibited the graces of the Gospel "householder." Both saints recognized, to cite one example, what was injurious to Christian morals in the divertissements that accompanied the Roman Carnival.

Remember that the City of the Popes suffered turmoil in the early sixteenth century. In order to compensate the Romans for the discomforts they had to endure during the sack of Rome

in 1527, Pope Paul III—the first of Philip’s twelve reigns—reinstated in 1536 the practice of the Roman Carnival. The days before Lent erupted in aphrodisiacal excess. The reforming instincts of Pius V and Philip Neri converged. “Vanità di vanità – Ogni cosa è vanità.”⁴ Their practical remedies proved different, however. Pius V sharply curtailed the revelries, and the Romans responded by donning thin, sad-faced masks. Philip was more imaginative. Forty Hours’ Devotion and, especially, his celebrated visits to the Seven Churches illustrate our saint’s pastoral prudence. His flair. To dissuade pious Romans from dallying with carnival-time vanities, Philip organized counter-celebrations. They met with great success. On the Monday of Holy Week, 1571, Pius V accompanied by six cardinals—comprising the perfect number of seven—visited seven Roman basilicas.⁵ He was the first Pope personally to participate in this Philippine devotion. A predecessor, Pope Paul IV, the second of Philip’s twelve, had been content to send two votive candles, and to ask Philip to pray for him during the procession that the Pope himself was unable to attend.

II

“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn 15:8). The Gospel proclaimed today reminds us that the ecclesial genius of Saint Philip Neri transcends the historical influences that shaped his personality and holiness. He belongs to a period when God worked in the Church a profound reform. Philip was a chosen instrument of this grace of renewal. It was God who made him a saint. When he was canonized on 12 March 1622 along with four Spaniards, Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila, and Isidore the Farmer, the Church made it clear that she judges holiness not by achievement but abiding: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you”

(Jn 15: 7). Four of these saints were personages of notable achievements; one was an ordinary farmer. The Church canonized them together. Each in his or her own way illustrates what it means to “abide.”

“Abide in me.” The saints show us how to live. They also teach us how to die. “Being seized with the sickness of which he died, he foretold his last hour, and prepared himself for it with redoubled fervor, and with the most tender devotion, patience, and cheerfulness. The piety with which he received the last sacraments drew tears from all that were present. Repeating inflamed acts of divine love, he expired”⁶ The narrative recounts the death of Isidore the Farmer, but it also describes, and well, what transpired in the Chiesa Nuova on this day in 1595. “Inflamed acts of divine love.”

For Philip Neri, Pentecost of 1544 brought a moment of singular divine favor. “O lux beatissima, reple cordis intima tuorum fidelium.”⁷ “O most blessed Light divine/ Shine within these hearts of thine,/ And our inmost being fill!” The Pentecost Sequence came to life in Philip. And he replies: “Enough, Lord, enough! I cannot take any more!”⁸ The catacomb grace sustained and transformed our saint throughout half a century. It was the occasion when Philip experienced in a profound way what it means to “abide in me” (Jn 15:7).

III

No one can read a biography of Philip Neri without discovering the Dominican church in Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva. This church of Saint Mary was built over the ruins of a temple dedicated to the Roman goddess of handicrafts and arts. The Minerva. Philip spent a lot of time there. Under the main altar reposes the body of Catherine of Siena, who died in Rome in late April of 1380.

The reformers who inspired, built, and animated San Marco traced back their spiritual pedigree to the fiery spirit of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), another Tuscan who came to Rome under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. When John Dominici da Banchini was about twenty, he met Catherine of Siena in Florence. Later, Blessed Raymond of Capua (1330-1399), Catherine's confessor and biographer, confided to him the reform movement that she had generated.

Whatever good came to Philip Neri from the Dominicans at San Marco originated, instrumentally of course, in the spiritual instruction that Catherine of Siena communicated to her circle of friends, *la bella brigatta*.

No wonder we discover Philip's Pentecost grace adumbrated in her *Dialogue*. Listen to how Catherine addresses God: "O immeasurable tender love! Who would not be set afire with such love? What heart could keep from breaking? You, deep well of charity, it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us!"⁹ "*Pazzo d'amore*" Mad with love? No sixteenth-century scholastic could ever have imagined saying anything like this. Our Philip, though, embraced this gift of the divine madness, and daily made it his own. "Who would not be set afire with such love?" Is it too much to imagine that as a priest, Philip Neri translated Catherine's ecstasies into a principle of pastoral care. "What heart," asks Catherine, "could keep from breaking?" And Philip Neri replies, "Enough, Lord, enough! I cannot take any more!"

End Notes

1. Paul Türks, *Philip Neri. The Fire of Joy*, trans. Daniel Utrecht, (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1995), p. 3.
2. See Guy Bedouelle, *La Réforme du Catholicisme (1480-1620)* (Paris: Cerf, 2002).
3. *La Réforme*, p. 114.
4. *The Fire*, p. 48.
5. Nicole Lemaitre, *Saint Pie V* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 233.
6. See Alban Butler, *The Lives or the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints*, vol. v, (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, & Company, 1864) for May 15.
7. The “Sequence” for Pentecost, “Veni, Sancte Spiritus.”
8. See Alfonso Capecehatro, *The Life of Saint Philip Neri, Apostle of Rome*, trans. T.A. Pope, (London: Burns Oates & Washburn, 1926), p. 70, cited in *The Fire*, p. 17.
9. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, no. 25, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P., (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 63.