

# THE LIFE OF ST. PHILIP NERI

## FROM FLORENCE TO ROME

Filippo Romolo Neri was born in Florence on July 21, 1515, the son of Francesco, a notary (although not a particularly successful one), and Lucrezia. He had two sisters - one older, one younger - and a brother who died in infancy. Philip's mother died when he was only five years old.

Little is known of Philip's childhood, other than a few amusing anecdotes and an account of a miracle. Apparently, young Philip playfully jumped on the back of a donkey laden with produce, leading them both to fall down a flight of steps into a cellar, with Philip at the bottom of the pile. He always praised God for having preserved him from harm.

Philip was known as "Pippo Buono" - "Good Little Phil" - for his good behavior and jovial spirit. His early spiritual formation came from the Dominicans at San Marco, where he walked among the frescoes of Fra Angelico and was inspired by the memory of the reformer Savonarola.



At the age of 18, Philip left Florence forever. His father sent him to live with his father's cousin, Romolo, a childless merchant, in San Germano. He furthered his formation by frequenting the Benedictine abbey at Monte Cassino. Philip remarked later that he could have been a rich man if he wanted to, but it didn't take him long to realize that business and worldly pursuits were not his calling. Drawn ever deeper into relationship with Christ, Philip desired to serve Him unreservedly.

Moving on from any ties to his family, Philip headed for Rome on what would turn out to be a one-way trip. Arriving in 1534, he never looked back; in fact, he would never leave the Eternal City again.

Settling in Rome, Philip earned a simple living as a tutor, spending as much time as he could at prayer. He was especially drawn to the catacombs, the resting place of the early martyrs of the Church. It was in the Catacomb of St. Sebastian that the pivotal moment of his life took place.

## PHILIP'S PENTECOST

Philip Neri was just 18 years old when he arrived in Rome. The city had been devastated by the sack of 1527, and the Church found herself diminished by scandal and clerical worldliness, struggling to respond to the Protestant reformers and to the decadence of the Renaissance. The Rome that Philip found was a miserable place, a shadow of its former self. Philip, moved with compassion and led by the Holy Spirit, sought out the seeds of renewal that the Eternal City held within it. In the evenings, he withdrew to pray in the catacombs of St. Sebastian, one of the burial

places of the early Christian martyrs. There, alone with God, he experienced the transforming power of divine love.

On the vigil of Pentecost in 1544, while in fervent prayer to the Holy Spirit, Philip was overcome by the force of the Spirit, and he saw a ball of fire enter through his mouth and lodge in his heart. The intensity of this flame of God's love caused him to cry out, "Enough, Lord, enough! I cannot take any more." It was an experience comparable to the stigmata of St. Francis, and its effects were similarly permanent. The Holy Spirit ruled his entire life.

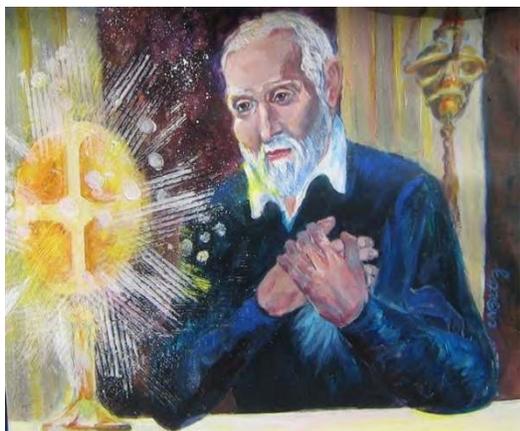


For the rest of his life, a warmth radiated from Philip's heart, so strong that he was known to go out with his cassock unbuttoned in the middle of winter. Troubled souls were calmed just by drawing near to Philip's heart and experiencing in his warmth the fire of divine love. He also experienced palpitations so violent that his whole body shook, and they affected the people and objects around him. Later, as a priest, he struggled to contain this shaking in order to celebrate Mass and to preach. After Philip's death, an examination revealed the extent of the physical effects of his Pentecost experience: permanently broken ribs, making room for the beating of a greatly expanded heart.

All of this took place while Philip was still a layman. He was not ordained a priest until 1551, at age 36, at the behest of his confessor, Persiano Rosa.

## PHILIP'S PRIESTHOOD

The celebration of Mass was the center of Philip's priestly life. He offered Mass every day, and exhorted his confreres to do the same. His fervor during Mass is well-documented; at times, his trembling would be such that he had to rest his elbows on the altar to avoid spilling the chalice. He was also observed levitating, his feet several inches off the floor. Towards the end of his life, the outward effects of his devotion led him to celebrate Mass only in private.



Philip encouraged frequent reception of Holy Communion, an unusual stance that some at the time viewed with suspicion. He also promoted frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament as well as public Adoration. He is credited with popularizing the Forty Hours Devotion in Rome.

Connected with Philip's love for the Eucharist was his emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not only as a remedy for sin and a source of peace, but also as a powerful means for growing in holiness of life. He encouraged frequent confession, through which it

becomes ever easier to persevere in conquering vices and in developing virtues. Philip backed up his words with actions, making it known that he was available for confession at practically any time. In a manner similar to St. John Vianney and St. Pio of Pietrelcina, Philip would spend countless hours hearing confessions. Rather than becoming weary, he experienced it as a kind of recreation.

Philip's ministry as a confessor was a central piece of his very personal approach to the mission of evangelization. It is said of Philip that he reconverted Rome to the faith one person at a time. As he did this, he gathered young people around him, forming the nucleus of the community that came to be known as the Oratory.

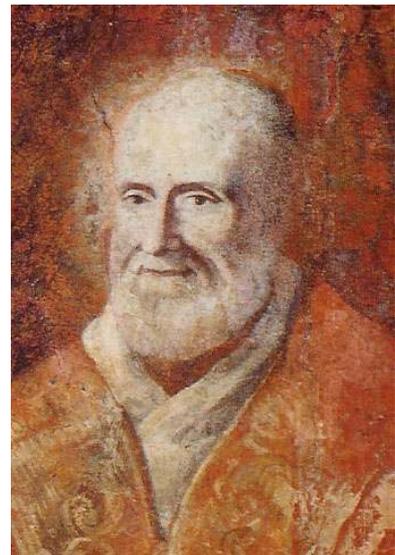
## ORIGINS OF THE ORATORY

It is typical of St. Philip that the precise origins of the Oratory are hard to pinpoint; its development was quite organic. Philip was not a systematic thinker or master planner; he was, however, docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

Philip was also a keen observer of human nature. He saw the needs of his age, particularly the moral hazards faced by young men passing their idle time in the piazzas of Rome. They were drawn to Philip by his constant care for them, and he began hosting a daily gathering, not only to keep them occupied but to inspire them to a holy life. As a spiritual father, he shared with them the encounter with the love of God which so inflamed his heart. These informal discussions centered on the Scriptures and the lives of the saints, with the aim of fostering in the young people a desire for prayer, the sacraments, and works of mercy.

Outings that today we might call "field trips" also had an important role to play. Service to the poor, the sick, and the abandoned was a key part of Philip's method of fostering humility; he would often bring the group, which included men of high social standing, to a hospital to perform the least desirable tasks. But there were also delightful picnics and days dedicated to visiting the Seven Pilgrim Churches - moments of rejoicing in the gifts of faith and community.

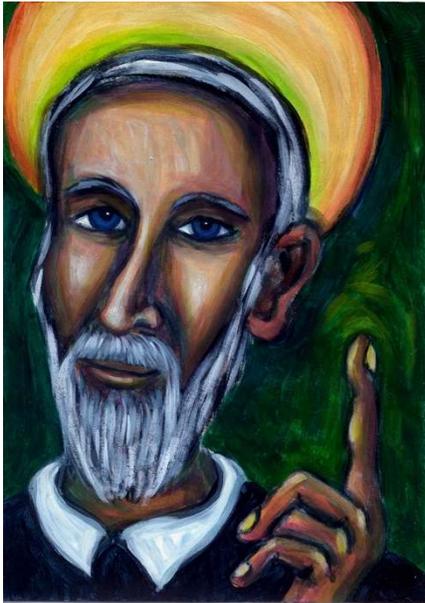
At first, this nascent community of disciples gathered in Philip's own room at the Church of San Girolamo della Carità, where he lived and served. However, they quickly outgrew the space, and a new location was needed. The problem was solved by constructing a sort of loft above the nave in the church. The space was referred to as the Oratory - the place of prayer. In time, the community came to be known for their gathering place: They were the *Oratoriani* - the community of the Oratory.



## FOUNDING THE CONGREGATION OF THE ORATORY

Philip continued to attract new penitents in his joyful and encouraging way. As the numbers attending the Oratory and seeking spiritual guidance continued to grow, Philip realized that he needed additional help. The Congregation of the Oratory developed based on this need to minister to the lay community in the manner Philip had established.

Philip drew the first members of the Congregation from among the men who were his penitents and who stood out in their participation at the Oratory. The early community, led by Philip, was a family modeled on the early Christian community, every member participating equally in the benefits and responsibilities of the common life. They did not take vows, but were bound by fraternal charity. They lived a simple life of prayer and service, building up the lay faithful. From the beginning, the primary aim of the Congregation has been to serve the lay community, which came first. Known as the “Secular Oratory”, this association of laity has found various modes of expression according to time and place.



Growing rapidly, the community sought a home and church of its own. At the suggestion of Pope Gregory XIII, they took on the care of the church of Santa Maria in Valicella. At the same time, the pope canonically erected the Congregation of the Oratory, on July 15, 1575. The church they inherited was in bad shape, and the community began rebuilding it. The present church that resulted is still known, over 400 years later, as the “Chiesa Nuova” - the “new church”!

The final years of Philip’s life were characterized by several bouts of serious illness which brought him close to death. He still prayed, visited the sick, and of course continued hearing confessions until the day he died. He celebrated Mass in his private chapel with great devotion.

Philip Neri died in the early hours of May 26, 1595. He was canonized on March 12, 1622 by Pope Gregory XV.