

## Newman's Debt to Saint Philip Neri

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Most people who frequent the world of the universities, or who read scholarly books and learned reviews have heard of Cardinal Newman. His influence and the fecundity of his thought have spread far beyond Christianity, and many of those who have read his work have no particular interest in his Catholicism. Some know him as a great nineteenth century controversialist, others as a theorist on educational questions; some are attracted by his style, others by his contribution to the idea of development and to his theories of belief. Then, of course, there are those for whom Newman is almost one of the Fathers of the Church, a great Catholic apologist, and a brilliant expositor and defender of the Faith.

It cannot, however, be said that St. Philip Neri is either widely known or greatly valued by many people today. The historian may know something of him, and those Catholics who retain an interest in and devotion to the Saints of the Calendar may have a dim recollection of this contemporary of St. Theresa of Avila and of the other Counter-Reformation Saints. Yet the Counter-Reformation is hardly in great vogue today, and neither for that matter is the cult of the Saints. What point is there, then, in trying to understand Newman, about whom so much is known, by comparing him to someone of whom so much has been forgotten? The answer to this is, from one point of view, simple. St. Philip founded the Oratory in Rome towards the end of the sixteenth century, and Newman was an Oratorian. Newman's search for holiness was undertaken under the inspiration of St. Philip, and within the framework of an Oratorian vocation.

Consequently, we can say at least that insofar as the Oratory was important to Newman he was influenced by St. Philip, and therefore we must know something about St. Philip to understand at least some aspects of Newman's life.

Dom Placid Murray in his *Newman the Oratorian*<sup>1</sup> has edited Newman's Chapter addresses and occasional papers on the Oratorian vocation. This book establishes that the idea of the Oratory was central to Newman's life as a Catholic. His introduction, and even more Newman's own papers, show how carefully Newman decided on how he was to live his life as a Catholic priest, and how deep his commitment to the Oratory was. Father Stephen Dessain has said: "It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the Oratory for Newman. It was his chosen vocation; to found it in England was the first commission he received from the Catholic authorities; it was the framework for the rest of his long life, and, as has so often been the case with founders, through it some of his cruellest trials came."<sup>2</sup>

What was this idea of the Oratory which so influenced Newman? It was not St. Philip's idea to found a new order or congregation in the Church. He wanted groups of secular priests living together without taking vows, priests who would live with no bond but that of charity, but who would live a life comparable to that of the best religious. As the Oratory developed each house lived its own separate existence, and was situated in a town or city with a church of its own. The work of an Oratory is prayer, preaching and the administration of the sacraments. The essential thing about an Oratorian vocation is a call to the life of prayer. This is clear from the

Constitutions or Traditions of the Oratory (what would be called the Rule in a religious order); it is clear from St. Philip's own teaching; and it is clear from the lives of all the great Oratorians. So an Oratory is supposed to be just that – a place where people pray.

The Oratory, as an institution, is a testimony to the centrality of the life of prayer, and thus a witness to the reality of God. Furthermore, a life ordered around this centrality of prayer is an object lesson that the acknowledgement of God is required for the obtaining of that happiness and satisfaction everyone is looking for.

The House and Church of the Oratory are supposed to be a center of prayer, of preaching, of study, and of learned work. Now, you cannot have a center without stability, without people who are always at the center to provide the appropriate services, and do the required work. Thus the idea of stability and of a life at home are central to Philip's conception. In 1848, Newman wrote:

The Congregation is to be the *home* of the Oratorian. The Italians, I believe, have no word for home \_ nor is it an idea which readily enters into the mind of a foreigner, at least not so readily as into the mind of an Englishman. It is remarkable then that the Oratorian Fathers should have gone out of their way to express the idea by the metaphorical word *nido* or nest, which is used by them almost technically.<sup>3</sup>

St. Philip founded the Oratory, and Newman having discovered the Oratory began to learn about St. Philip. This seems to be the historical progression. Once, however, he began to discover St. Philip he found someone, as we would say today, with whom he could identify. Philip was born at Florence in 1515 (the same year as St. Teresa of Avila). Later, near Naples, while working in an uncle's business (which he was to inherit) he had a religious experience which left him without interest in secular pursuits. He renounced his inheritance and moved to Rome. From this time, when he was about 18, until his early 30's, he lived the life of a poor recluse, earning just enough through tutoring to meet his simple wants. During this period he spent long hours, even whole nights, in prayer in the catacombs where the early Christians had buried their dead, and where they could safely celebrate the mysteries of their religion. Those dark and silent galleries were for Philip the living and speaking image of the ages of persecution. Cardinal Newman, in a litany he wrote, called Philip "Man of primitive times," and in many respects he does seem more a man of earlier times than one whose lot was cast amid the splendors and conflicts of the sixteenth century.

Out of those dark and mysterious catacombs, out of the damp and dangerous corridors under the earth, a light began to shine for Philip that took possession of him in a way that left physiological as well as psychological after-effects. From out of the ruins of a persecuted and devastated Church a light began to shine not only for Philip, but *in* Philip. When he was 28, in 1544, on the Eve of Pentecost, while he was praying in the Catacomb of S. Sebastiano, he had a direct experience of the Holy Spirit in the form of a globe of fire that lodged in his heart.

Whatever we are to make of this mysterious happening (all the early biographers do not hesitate to call it a miracle), there can be no doubting the effects in Philip's own life. He became, in the years that followed, the restorer and regenerator of the Church in Rome. It has been said that the

work of St. Ignatius and the Society of Jesus in turning back the Reformation all over Europe would have been of no avail without the work of Philip at the center of the Church.

At 35, on his confessor's advice, he became a priest. His Oratory grew out of the confessional where he spent long hours each day. He began to have spiritual conferences, and lectures on the lives of the Saints. A room or oratory was built for these gatherings, and the priests who helped came to be called Oratorians.

Newman tells us that Philip came not to argue, not to berate, not to condemn: "He put from him monastic rule and authoritative speech, as David refused the armour of his King – he would be an ordinary individual priest as others, and his weapons would be but unaffected humility and unpretending love."<sup>4</sup> But, whatever St. Philip was, he was anything but ordinary. Pope John Paul II in our own day has written very movingly about St. Philip and his work. The Pope said on St. Philip's feast day in 1979:

St. Philip was a man of culture and charity, of study and organization, of teaching and prayer. For Rome he was a tireless confessor, a brilliant educator and a friend of all, and particularly he was an expert counsellor and a delicate director of consciences. Popes and cardinals, bishops and priests, princes and politicians, religious and artists, had recourse to him: illustrious persons such as the historian Cesare Baronio and the famous composer Palestrina, St. Charles Borromeo and St. Ignatius of Loyola, and Cardinal Federigo Borromeo confided in his heart, the heart of a father and friend.<sup>5</sup>

But Philip had not begun with these people; he had begun with the poor and the lonely and the outcast, and so the Holy Father continues:

That poor little room in his apartment was above all the goal of an immense multitude of humble persons of the people, the suffering, the disinherited, the outcasts of society, young people, children who looked to him to receive advice, forgiveness, peace, encouragement, material and spiritual aid.<sup>6</sup>

Newman, having come to know Philip as the founder of the Oratory, came to love him for himself. Yet on the face of it the reason for the attraction is not obvious. Dwight Culler has argued that Newman was able to see in St. Philip the incarnation of his educational ideals, and I think he is correct.<sup>7</sup> Philip's sanctity was built on, or into, the humanism of renaissance Italy. St. Philip, if he had not become a saint, might well have been a courtier or a philosopher instead. In his youth, says Father Bacci, one of his first biographers, he studied philosophy and theology until "he was reckoned one of the most distinguished scholars in the schools of Rome." But, when "he had made sufficient advancement in learning, not for his own use only, but also for the edification of others ... he laid his studies aside and applied himself wholly to that science which is found in the crucifix."<sup>8</sup>

Philip lived, as Newman himself said of him, when "pride mounted high, and the sense held rule . . . when medieval winter was receding, and the summer sun of civilization was bringing into leaf and flower a thousand forms of luxurious enjoyment; when a new world of thought and

beauty had opened before the human mind, in the discoveries of classic literature and art."<sup>9</sup> Philip saw the dangers this presented but he also saw that no matter what might be the methods of others in meeting them, his own method must be that of mildness and moderation, of patience and a sweet, attractive charm. "He preferred to yield to the stream, and direct the current, which he could not stop, of science, literature, art and fashion, and to sweeten and sanctify what God had made very good and man had spoiled."<sup>10</sup>

Professor Cullen has, I think, shown us the important truth that in St. Philip, Newman saw the realization of his educational ideal. But, there remains the question of the nature of the sanctity into which the learning was to be incorporated. Dean Church, Newman's Anglican friend, has given us a clue to the answer of this question in the following passage about Newman's conversion:

At least the Roman Church had not only preserved, but maintained at full strength through the centuries to our day two things of which the New Testament was full, and which was characteristic of it \_ devotion and self-sacrifice . . . Devotion and sacrifice, prayer and self-denying charity, in one word sanctity, are at once on the surface of the New Testament and interwoven with its substance . . . He turned to where, in spite of every other disadvantage, he thought he found them. In S. Filippo Neri he could find a link between the New Testament and progressive civilization.<sup>11</sup>

"Devotion and self-sacrifice, prayer and self-denying charity, in one word sanctity . . ." Newman saw these ideals made real in the life of St. Philip Neri, and St. Philip became his model and inspiration of sanctity. This devotion to St. Philip, on Newman's part, was no merely formal acknowledgement of holiness, no mere conventional recognition of the sanctity of the founder of the Institute to which he belongs. "As Christians, he writes, we have given ourselves to Christ, to make this more sure and definite, we have, as Oratorians, given ourselves to St. Philip \_ we are not our own property, but his, and we must please, not ourselves, but him."<sup>12</sup> In addition to this devotion to St. Philip as the Founder of the Oratory, there was also a growing into a more personal relationship with, and a very real sense of dependence on, the saint:

As years go on, I have less sensible devotion and inward life . . . I more and more wonder at *old* saints. St. Aloysius or St. Francis Xavier or St. Carlo, are nothing to St. Philip. O Philip gain me some little portion of thy fervour. I live more and more in the past, and in hopes that the past may revive in the future.<sup>13</sup>

It is thus clear that Newman found in the Oratory not only a way in which to lead his priestly life, but also, in St. Philip, he found a model in which he could see the realization of his educational and spiritual ideals. He believed that, as the old catechism formulated it, to know, love and serve God was the one thing needful. Let us grant with the Second Vatican Council that we can learn from the saints in our own quest for sanctity. If we work within this framework we will see that there are many modes in which the saints can inspire us. Chesterton said, (before the widespread neglect of the saints appeared) that each age spontaneously gravitates to the saints who exhibit the qualities the age needs. I would be prepared to argue at great length that St. Philip Neri is such a saint for our own age, and that we would do well, as Pope John Paul

has suggested, to take him as our guide and model. It is clear in his own quest for sanctity, John Henry Newman *did* take St. Philip as such a guide.

Newman was a man cast in an heroic mould. Morally, intellectually and spiritually he outshines many of those closest to him. His Cause is being considered by the authorities in Rome, and certainly there would seem to be good reason to canonize him. But, if and when he is declared a Saint, St Philip will also be there. St Philip Neri, that 'hidden hero' (as Newman termed him) who was the inspiration and support of the Oxford scholar who, possessing one of the greatest intellects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was proud to be a pupil in The Philip's school of sanctity.

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<sup>1</sup> Placid Murray, O.S.B., *Newman the Oratorian, His Unpublished Oratory Papers* (Dublin, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Dessain (of the Birmingham Oratory), *John Henry Newman* (London and Edinburgh, 1966), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, "Duties of the Church Towards Knowledge" (Image Books, 1959), p. 239.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Chiesa Nuova May 26, 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition, June 8, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> A. Dwight Culler, *The Imperial Intellect, A Study of Newman's Educational Ideal*, "The Religion of Philosophy" (New Haven, 1955), pp. 242-3.

<sup>8</sup> Pietro Giacomo Bacci (of the Roman Oratory), *The Life of St. Philip Neri*, first published in 1622. English translation and Edition by F. I. Antrobus (of the London Oratory) (London, 1902), p. 19. (Cited by Culler, *op. cit.*, p. 242.)

<sup>9</sup> *The Idea of a University*, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>11</sup> R. W. Church, *Occasional Papers*, II (London, 1897), pp. 470-4. Cited in Dessain, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Newman's Oratory Papers No. 26, in Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Newman, *Autobiographical Writings* (London and New York, 1955), p. 249. Quoted in Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 108.