

SOLEMNITY OF SAINT PHILIP NERI, FOUNDER AND PATRON OF THE ORATORY
OXFORD ORATORY
OXFORD, ENGLAND
26 MAY 2015

Wis 7, 7-14
Phil 4, 4-9
Jn 15, 1-8

SERMON

Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen.

It is the source of deepest joy for me to offer the Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Saint Philip Neri, Founder and Patron of the Oratory, in this fifth centenary of his birth, at the Oxford Oratory. I express my deepest gratitude to the Very Reverend Father Daniel Seward, Provost and Parish Priest, for the invitation to celebrate the Pontifical Mass for the Solemnity, and I thank all of the Fathers and Brothers of the Oratory for their warm and generous hospitality.

I thank God for the extraordinary occasion to implore, through the intercession of Our Lady and Saint Philip, His abundant blessings upon the Oxford Oratory, upon its most important life and work. In a particular way, I ask God to bless the University of Oxford, renowned center of learning for many centuries, and to make it generously receptive to the priestly ministry offered here after the example and under the protection of Saint Philip Neri.

I am grateful for the presence of the Knights and Dames of Malta, for whom I am honored to be the Cardinal Patron. May my visit be for them a confirmation in the twofold mission of our Order, the defense of the faith and the care of the poor, in Oxford.

Through the Parable of the Vine and the Branches, our Lord expressed the reality of our communion with Him in the Church from the moment of our baptism. He alone is our salvation, and He has chosen to make our hearts one with His glorious pierced Heart. From His seat at the right hand of the Father, He unceasingly and without measure pours forth the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit from His Heart into our hearts. He abides with us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Church, His Mystical Body, in the hearts of Her living members. Let us listen again to the clear and firm words of our Lord to us in the Parable:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him,
he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.¹

¹ Jn 15, 5.

Saint Paul's exhortation to put aside anxiety and to turn to God in confident prayer is solidly grounded in the word of Christ, in the reality of our life in Him. We can be confident that "the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus."²

As living branches grafted into Christ, the Vine, our lives are disciplined and animated, so that we produce the fruit for which God has created us in His own image and likeness. God the Vinedresser, Who has brought us to life in His only-begotten Son, prunes us, His branches, so that we remain alive in Christ and "bear more fruit."³ The pruning of suffering, repentance and reparation gives us confidence that, notwithstanding our fears, doubts, errors and sins, Christ alive in us draws us ever more to "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious."⁴ God the Father draws us to Himself, to the excellence of His Being, in which we participate, thanks to His all-gracious and inexhaustibly abundant love. If we, as Saint Paul urges us, think about "excellence," about "anything worthy of praise,"⁵ we are led to their source in God the Son Incarnate, our Lord and Savior. Saint Paul in fact bids us to imitate his own obedience to the grace poured forth from the Heart of Christ into his heart and so to live in God, as true branches on the Vine: "What you have learnt and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you."⁶

In Christ, the Word made flesh, we comprehend more and more the truth, the beauty and goodness of all things. The sacred writer of the Book of Wisdom, anticipating the Incarnation of the Word with which the Father has created all things and sustains them in being, recounts how the wisdom of God opened up to him the enduring font of his attraction to created realities:

I loved [the spirit of wisdom] more than health and beauty,
and I chose to have her rather than light,
because her radiance never ceases.
All good things came to me along with her,
and in her hands uncounted wealth.
I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom leads them;

² Phil 4, 7,

³ Jn 15, 2.

⁴ Phil 4, 8.

⁵ Phil 4, 8.

⁶ Phil 4, 9.

but I did not know that she was their mother.⁷

In Christ alone, through the truth of His teaching and the love of His discipline, we know the Wisdom of God. By Christ alone, the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit, which is first wisdom, is poured out unceasingly and without measure into our hearts.

Saint Philip Neri was grafted by God the Father into the living Vine of His only-begotten Son in a remarkable way, to an heroic degree. Celebrating the fifth centenary of his birth, we reflect upon the corruption of the Renaissance world into which he was born. A good and virtuous youth, he could have easily abandoned the goodness of Christ and followed a worldly way of life, according to the expectations of the culture in which he was living. But he knew Christ, the source of every good gift, and, at Christ's call, left what was thought to be his secure economic future in order to abandon himself completely to Christ. Although gifted for the study of philosophy and theology, he understood that his calling was to evangelize directly, to lead others to Christ by handing on to them the truths of the faith and its beauty in the life of prayer and, above all, of divine worship.

In the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian on Pentecost of 1544, He received from Christ not only the confirmation of his calling but the grace to fulfill his mission. The "ball of fire" which Saint Philip saw enter his mouth and which expanded his heart for an ever greater love of God and all God's children later manifested itself in the light which Saint Philip brought to the City of Rome which, at the time, was enveloped in so much darkness.⁸ Christ thus increased the life of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the heart of Saint Philip for the salvation of many souls, not only through his own apostolic activity but also through its continuation in the apostolic activity of the Congregation of the Oratory, the company of his spiritual sons.

Considering the great richness of his apostolic life, one is led always finally to the source of his heroic sanctity: Jesus Christ alive in his heart through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What Saint Philip wrote in a letter to his niece is a reflection of the life which he was living daily and in which he was striving to live more fully and perfectly. He wrote these words to her:

God give you grace that you may so gather yourself up into His divine love, and enter so deeply through the wound of His side into the living Fount of the God made man, that you may annihilate yourself and all

⁷ Wis 7, 10-12.

⁸ Cf. Paul Türks, *Philip Neri: The Fire of Joy*, tr. Daniel Utrecht (New York: Alba House, 1995), pp. 16-17, and 112. [Hereafter: Paul Türks].

self-love, and never more find a way to come out thence.⁹

Truly, Saint Philip had, by God's grace, given his heart into the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus, and there he found the purification of sin and the animation of divine love. Even as he exhorted his niece, so he lived in a manner never "to find a way" to come out of the Heart of Jesus.

Thus, we understand Saint Philip's consistent exhortation to the practice of humility and to the purgation of all self-love, so that the grace which comes from the Heart of Jesus alone may animate the human heart.¹⁰ Thus, too, we understand the importance which Saint Philip placed upon spiritual meetings in which the truths of the faith are pondered, upon the study of the lives of the saints in which those truths are manifested in heroic holiness of life, and upon the Sacraments, especially Penance and the Holy Eucharist,¹¹ in which we truly meet Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.¹²

Thus, we may also understand the particular form of apostolic life which Saint Philip established for his brothers in the Oratory. He wanted their life to resemble as much as possible the communal life of the Apostles during the public ministry of Christ. The community of the Oratory is formed by the grace of Christ in Whose Person the individual Oratorians exercise His pastoral charity toward the souls of all men. I recall the words of Pope Saint John Paul II, which we see exemplified in the life of Saint Philip Neri and in his foundation of the Oratory:

The internal principle, the force which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest inasmuch as he is configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd, is *pastoral charity*, as a participation in Jesus Christ's own pastoral charity, a gift freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit and likewise a task and a call which demand a free and committed response on the part of the priest.¹³

⁹ Paul Türks, p. 113.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Türks, pp. 117-120.

¹¹ Cf. Paul Türks, p. 114.

¹² Cf. Jn 14, 6.

¹³ "Principium interius, virtus scilicet qua presbyteri vita spiritualis animetur et quasi manuducatur, quatenus is configuratur Christo Capiti et Pastori, ponendum est in caritate pastoralis, id est in participatione ipsius caritatis pastoralis Christi Iesu; quae et gratuitum Spiritus Sancti donum erit, et simul munus et liberum responsale presbyteri responsum." Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Adhortatio Apostolica *Pastores dabo vobis*, "de Sacerdotum formatione in aetatis nostrae rerum condicione," 25 Martii 1992, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 84 (1992), 691-692, n. 23. English translation: John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis, on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), pp. 57-58, no. 23.

The sometimes eccentric manner of Saint Philip, it seems to me, was his way of pointing always to Christ Who was acting in him, lest his brothers or the faithful think that it was Philip, instead of Christ, who was accomplishing the saving mission. In the same way, it seems to me that the simplicity of the canonical structure of the Oratory, with its insistence on the communal life, is aimed at manifesting Christ to others in as direct a manner as possible, and at reminding the company of Oratorians that, notwithstanding the particular gifts given to each, it is always Christ alone who remains the Head and Shepherd of the flock, Who accomplishes the mission.

Celebrating the fifth centennial of the birth of Saint Philip Neri, let us all take particular example from the manner in which he encountered a secularized and, therefore, corrupt culture. Let us implore his intercession as we ourselves confront a culture in which even the most fundamental truths, the truth about human life and the truth about its cradle in the family constituted by marriage, are consistently ignored, defied and grievously violated. I recall how Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger addressed the contemporary secular culture in his homily during the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff, celebrated before the conclave during which he was elected to the See of Peter. He spoke of how the “the thought of many Christians” has been tossed about, in our time, by various “ideological currents,” observing that we are witnesses to the “human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error,” about which Saint Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians*.¹⁴ He noted that, in our time, those who live according to “a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church” are viewed as fundamentalists, as extremists, while relativism, that is, “letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’,” is extolled.¹⁵ Regarding the source of the grave moral evils of our time, he concluded: “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”¹⁶

Called to transform the world in Christ, let us, with Saint Philip Neri, turn to Christ, to His truth and love handed on to us in His Mystical Body, the Church. Let us practice the humility which recognizes that only the grace of God saves us from our sins and animates us

¹⁴ “...correnti ideologiche... pensiero di molti cristiani... sull’inganno degli uomini, sull’astuzia che tende a trarre nell’errore... una fede chiara, secondo il Credo della Chiesa... il lasciarsi portare «qua e là da qualsiasi vento di dottrina»... Si va costituendo una dittatura del relativismo che non riconosce nulla come definitivo e che lascia come ultima misura solo il proprio io e le sue voglie.” “Initium Conclavis,” 18 Aprilis 2005, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 97 (2005), 687. English translation: Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff: Monday, 18 April: Homily by the Cardinal who became Pope,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 20 April 2005, p. 3. Cf. *Eph* 4:14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

for the pure and selfless love which conquers sin and everlasting death. Let us follow the counsel which Saint Philip gave to his niece. Let us give our hearts into the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through the opening of His glorious pierced Side, and let us strive, through prayer and penance, never to leave that home in which alone we find forgiveness, peace and strength. This is not fundamentalism. This is not extremism. This is living in Christ, in the Wisdom of God. As Christ sanctified the times of Saint Philip with an abundant outpouring of the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit into Saint Philip's heart, so may He sanctify our times through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.

Christ now descends from His heavenly home to make His home with us, to make sacramentally present His Sacrifice on Calvary by which He frees us from sin and strengthens us with the incomparable fruit of the Sacrifice: His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Let us now give our hearts, through His glorious pierced Side, into His Sacred Heart. Following the example of Saint Philip Neri and helped by his prayers, may we find in the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus the healing and the strength to transform our lives, to transform the culture which would draw our hearts away from that Most Sacred Heart.

Heart of Jesus, fount of life and holiness, have mercy on us.

Our Lady of Walsingham, pray for us.

Saint Joseph, Foster-Father of Jesus and true Spouse of the Virgin Mary, pray for us.

Saint Philip Neri, Founder and Patron of the Oratory, pray for us.

Raymond Leo Cardinal BURKE