

THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE ORATORY

The Oratorian life is often described as having four distinguishing characteristics, or “pillars”: PRAYER, CHARITY, HUMILITY, and JOY.

PRAYER

Prayer is the origin of our name. That says something about how centrally important prayer is for our life. Before anything else, an Oratorian - and an Oratorian community - prays.

Praying together brings structure and stability to the common life of the Oratory. This was true from the beginning, when St. Philip instituted his daily gatherings, and it remains so today. Coming together morning and evening to pray grounds our life together and the work we do in God’s love. Our participation in various apostolic activities must be founded upon and informed by deep prayer.

Every Oratorian is to develop his life of personal prayer - the expression of his relationship with the Lord. This is something that came very naturally for St. Philip. He enjoyed a special intimacy with the Lord that made him free in his prayer, and allowed him to teach others to approach prayer with confidence and trust.

To unite oneself to the Lord and to seek His will need not require many words. St. Philip preferred to use brief prayers that were easy to remember and to repeat, reducing them to their essentials. For example, the Hail Mary would be expressed as “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me.” St. Philip recognized the power of the name of Jesus; the Holy Name can itself be a prayer. These simple prayers can be used throughout the day, whenever the need arises: to recall God’s presence, and to combat temptation and fear. When repeated, they can help us to quiet ourselves in preparation for deeper meditation and contemplation.

St. Philip’s approach is accessible to everyone, and embracing it allows us to be, like him, “active contemplatives”, always drawn to prayer, yet always willing to serve others.

CHARITY

For St. Philip, the exercise of charity was central to his discipleship of Jesus. His first apostolate was of charity and service. In particular, he developed a long association with the San Giacomo hospital, where the incurable and the destitute languished in squalor and loneliness. St. Philip, his friends and his penitents would care for their physical and spiritual needs. For the Holy Year of 1550, he helped to organize the Confraternity of the Most Holy Trinity, which ministered to the pilgrims who came to Rome for the jubilee. Throughout his adult life, St. Philip cared for the abandoned and the poor, and defended the marginalized and the persecuted. There are many stories attesting to his personal acts of charity towards widows, orphans, and prisoners.

Above all, for St. Philip, and for all Oratorians, charity means putting the Word into action, living the faith we profess. Loving people involves speaking about God and sharing the Gospel, and it also includes demonstrating God’s generous love through acts of practical charity. These are two

sides of the same coin, and both are indispensable. Experiencing the suffering of others as our own, and assisting them without regard for our own comfort, as St. Philip did, becomes a powerful testimony of faith in action.

Within the Oratory, the exercise of fraternal charity brings serenity to the life of the community and fosters solidarity among its members. The mutual encouragement, exercise of mercy, and fraternal correction offered one to another, builds up the whole community. This charity, when lived well, serves as an inspiration to others and attracts others to the Oratorian life. It echoes the life of the early Christian community which so inspired St. Philip.

HUMILITY

When we think of humility, we are tempted to see it as a liability in today's world. Humility is viewed as a weakness - perhaps a lack of confidence or willingness to be steamrolled - but this is not true humility. Humility is seeing ourselves as God sees us, as we truly are - no more, but also no less - and acting on that truth. This means acknowledging and using the gifts and abilities God has bestowed on us, rejoicing in them with a sense of gratitude rather than self-aggrandizement. It also means recognizing our limitations and faults, living accordingly and submitting ourselves to the mercy of God rather than trying to justify ourselves. Humility also requires defending ourselves and others from unjust treatment, out of respect for ourselves, our oppressors, and the truth.

This sense of humility explains why Oratorians can be described as the "stagehands" of the Church. They put their gifts to work in the service of the Church's mission, without concern for their own comfort, and desiring recognition and praise from no one but the Lord. They are not ambitious when it comes to awards or titles, which they eschew (you will not meet an Oratorian monsignor!). In spite of their reputation for holiness, there are relatively few Oratorian saints and blessed, because they do not draw attention to themselves.

The humility characteristic of Oratorian life, as with its other traits, comes to us directly from the example of St. Philip, for whom humility was to be completely detached from self so as to give himself entirely to God. He was relentless (and often humorous) in inculcating this virtue into himself and his penitents, as numerous stories about him attest. "Above all things," he was known to repeat, "one must be humble."

JOY

Many people are surprised to learn that there is a Patron Saint of Joy, and his name is Philip Neri! Above all, this is what St. Philip was known for. His temperament was naturally cheerful; even in his youth he was known as "Pippo Buono" or "good little Phil." His sense of humor was legendary, but he was not silly. St. Philip's joy surpassed that of someone who simply possesses a genial character, because his joy was entirely grounded in reality.

The reality on which St. Philip's joy was based is the profound experience of the loving presence of God. Joy is truly a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it was the working of the Spirit in St. Philip's life which allowed him to live his vocation with confidence and peace, enjoying his life of service to the Lord and drawing others to experience that same joy. The love of God sets us free and brings

us a joy that transcends earthly happiness because it is a foretaste of heaven. This is what made St. Philip so attractive and such a successful evangelist to his contemporaries.

For Oratorians, the fruit of joy is experienced in the family life of the community, sharing together the daily experience of God's steadfast love through the ups and downs of life and ministry. In our apostolic work, the joy of following Christ helps us to attract others to Him and to His Church.

As St. Philip himself said: "Find delight in communal life and avoid all singularity, attend to purity of heart, because the Holy Spirit dwells in innocent and simple minds, and He is the teacher of prayer, putting us in a state of continuous peace and joy, which is the foretaste of heaven."