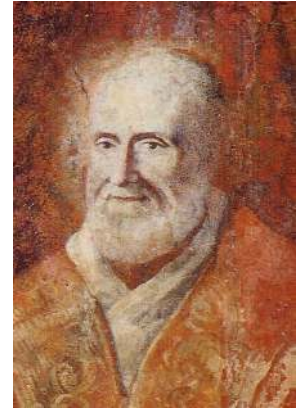


ST. PHILIP NERI, THE ORATORY, & THE CALL TO HOLINESS

The current resurgence of the Oratory in our time is well-illustrated by the fact that in the past several years, new Oratories have been founded on five continents. The Oratorian way seems especially well suited to the contemporary Church which, in the writings of the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II, has emphasized the universal call to holiness and the vocation of the laity. These are clear themes in St. Philip's life and ministry and they are central to the legacy he has entrusted to his spiritual children for the continual renewal of the Church.



Philip saw the decadence and despair of an age not unlike our own, which led him to devote himself to the reconversion of Rome, one person at a time. Philip's way was one of fraternal charity, lived simply and humbly but constantly, without pretence or fanfare, always with Christ at the center. Practically, this took the form of an apostolate of personal encounter, of using the fire in his heart to enkindle the desire for holiness in others, an apostolate carried out especially in the confessional and in spiritual direction. He encouraged perseverance and continual conversion, saying, "One does not become a saint in four days."

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council write of holiness as a response to the invitation to all the baptized to share in God's life as His own children. Holiness is rooted in the teaching of Jesus, exemplified by His own life; it is made possible by Jesus' sending the Holy Spirit; and it is lived through cooperation with God's will. The Council Fathers make clear that not only are we invited to holiness, but in fact we are obliged to strive for it, for in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded his disciples to "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Holiness is, according to Pope John Paul II, the task that "must shape the whole of Christian life". He emphasizes holiness as an "urgent pastoral task" for which our expectations ought to be high.

The Council Fathers also point out that holiness is not reserved for a privileged few, but is open to everyone in the Church regardless of rank or status, position in the hierarchy, or vocation. The universal call to holiness is inextricably tied to vocation, not in the traditional exclusive sense, but in a radically inclusive way. St. Philip had this in mind when he said: "Those who live in the world should strive to become saints in their own homes. For neither life at court, in a profession or in the workplace is a hindrance to one who wants to serve God." Philip's emphasis on the formation of the laity and the encouragement of the lay vocation led to the creation of the Congregation of the Oratory for the service of the Secular Oratory.

Four hundred years before Vatican II, the Oratory was sounding the call to holiness. Today, that call goes forth with renewed strength, echoing the words of St. Philip: "Right in the middle of the crowd, we can be on the way to perfection."