

THE CONGREGATION OF THE ORATORY OF SAINT PHILIP NERI

Our Founder

Born in Florence, Italy, in 1515, Philip Romolo Neri settled in Rome at the age of 18 or 19. There he lived as a layman until his mid-thirties, and earned his room and board by tutoring the children of a family from his native city.

Once his teaching was done each morning, Philip had the rest of the day to himself. He spent most of the evening and late night hours in prayer. In the afternoons, however, Philip could be found in the streets and piazzas of Rome, introducing himself to young men his own age who were enjoying a post-lunch *riposo*. Philip made friends quickly, and encouraged them to join him in going to church, and in the many works of charity with which he was involved. Together they worked in hospitals, assisted foreigners on pilgrimage to Rome, and supported one another in faith and prayer.

At the age of 34, Philip became a priest, and he invited his friends to join him each day in his room at the rectory of San Girolamo della Carità. After giving each a chance to come to Confession, Father Philip would join the group for prayer and informal discussions of Scripture, Church history and the Catholic Faith. Often, he encouraged the lay members of the group to take the lead in these activities.

Slowly, the circle began to grow, and it soon became impossible to meet in Father Philip's room. A loft over the side aisle of the church was converted into a chapel, known as "the Oratory", from a Latin word meaning "a place for prayer." As word of Father Philip's group continued to spread, it became known as "the afternoon exercises at the Oratory" or, simply, "The Oratory".

Beginnings of the Congregation

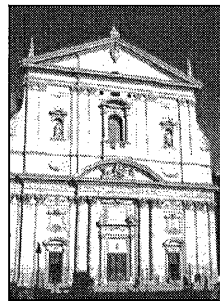
Father Philip encouraged his followers to receive the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confession frequently. As the group at the Oratory got larger, it became difficult for Father Philip to care for their sacramental needs on his own. Around the same time, a group of lay people originally from



Florence asked Father Philip to be in charge of their church in Rome, San Giovanni dei Fiorientini.

Father Philip had an idea that would solve both problems at once: he encouraged several men who had been attending the Oratory to study for the priesthood, and arranged for them to staff the parish of San Giovanni. He provided them with a simple rule of life, and instructed them to join him three times a day at San Girolamo: for Confession in the morning, the Oratory in the afternoon, and communal prayer in the evening.

This arrangement lasted for about ten years, until the Oratory exercises were moved to a specially-built chapel at San Giovanni. This proved to be unsuitable, however, and in 1575, Father Philip asked the Pope to give him a church and house as a permanent home for the Oratory and the priests



who cared for it. On July 15, 1575, Pope Gregory XIII deeded the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella—located along a main road in the center of Rome—"to Reverend Father Philip Neri and the priests of the Congregation of the Oratory." The deed for the church is the first official document to mention the Congregation, and marks the foundation of our community.

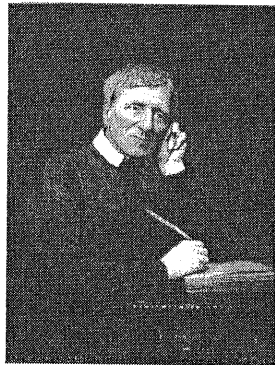
The Congregation Expands

Before long, the way of life in the Oratory inspired imitation. With Father Philip's encouragement, some of his priests moved to Naples to begin a new community there. Once they were settled in their life and ministry in Naples, Father Philip allowed them to manage their own affairs as an independent congregation, establishing the principle that there would never be one Oratory over another. Bishops and priests from various cities in Italy and elsewhere soon asked permission to adopt Oratorian customs in their own dioceses, a request that Father Philip found a bit strange. He never set out to found a religious Order, he said; he was only responding to what he believed God was asking him to do in his particular situation.

As the Congregation grew, and its founder entered his seventies, the priests and brothers of the Roman Oratory encouraged Father Philip to write a Rule or Constitutions for them. Although he insisted that he knew nothing about founding an Order, he allowed the Congregation to discuss the matter, and occasionally made additions or corrections to the drafts they submitted for his approval. He rejected the idea of a vow of poverty, and wanted his followers to live and dress as secular priests. In fact, he insisted that the members of the Oratory would make no vows or public promises at all; there was to be "no bond," he said, "except charity."

The original Constitutions of the Congregation of the Oratory received papal approval in 1612, 17 years after the death of Saint Philip on May 26, 1595. Over the next two centuries, the Oratorian ideal spread rapidly throughout Europe, and in the mission territories of America and India. By the beginning of the 19th century there were more than 200 Oratories in the world, each following the Constitutions of the Roman Oratory, and adapting them as necessary to local conditions.

Sadly, the period of revolution and secularism that rocked Europe in the first half of the 19th century led to the decline or forcible closing of many Oratories, particularly in Italy. At the same time, however, a group of recent converts from the Church of England, led by a former Anglican clergyman named John Henry Newman, felt called to the community life of the Oratory, and were ordained to the priesthood in Rome with the understanding that they would found new Oratories in England. Father Newman founded the Birmingham Oratory in 1848, and his associate Father Frederick Faber founded the London Oratory the following year.



The Oratory Today

The Congregation of the Oratory continues to grow. In some cases, one Congregation may send some members to begin a new Oratory in a different city. More often it happens that priests and laymen in a particular place, inspired by the life of Saint Philip and the Oratorian ideal, ask permission of the local bishop to begin a new "pious association of the faithful" in his diocese, following the Oratorian way of life. After some time this group may be established as a Congregation under the direction of the diocesan bishop. Once the new community has demonstrated that it is stable and capable of carrying out Oratorian life and ministry, it is established by the pope as a Society of Apostolic Life of Pontifical Right, a permanent, autonomous Congregation.

At present there are 80 Oratories in 19 countries, including eight in the United States. Oratorians serve the universal Church and their local dioceses and parishes by living the charism imparted to them by Saint Philip. The characteristics of the Oratorian way of life are the same as in his day, namely:

- Priests of the Oratory are secular priests; that is, they do not profess religious vows.
- Oratorians live a fraternal life in a stable community. They make a commitment to one local Congregation, and are rarely transferred from one house to another.
- Their spirituality is marked by fervent prayer; reverent celebration of the Sacraments, especially Mass and Confession; familiar preaching of the Word of God; and a joyful love for God and neighbor, particularly their brothers in the Congregation.
- They remain connected with the chief concern of Saint Philip by a commitment to pastoral care of young adults, especially through the group known as the Secular Oratory.

A new Community in Washington

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, has accepted our request to establish a community-in-formation for the Oratory in the Archdiocese of Washington and he has assigned to us the Parish of St Thomas, Apostle in Woodley Park. The Parish will be the home of our nascent Oratorian community. The Cardinal has particularly asked us to establish adult formation in the form of the Secular Oratory and to have a special concern for the on-going spiritual formation and care of the priests of the Archdiocese. We are delighted to be entrusted with these important tasks and we willingly commit ourselves to this work together with the care of the whole parish community.

Our community currently numbers only two priest members, although we hope, in due course, to be four or five in number, should God favor us with vocations to the community. Once we have reached this number and the life of our community is established, we hope to petition the Holy See for the canonical recognition of what will become the Washington Oratory. Until such a time, we shall be known as the Community of St Philip Neri.

The Community of St Philip Neri *A Community-in-Formation for the Oratory* *In the Archdiocese of Washington*

We hope to be in residence from July 10th and to begin our community life at that time.
Please remember us in your prayers.

Msgr Andrew R. Wadsworth (Moderator) Fr Richard A. Mullins (Pastor)

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