

ROMAN HOLY-DAY

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WERE one to draw up a kind of genealogical table of the saints of the sixteenth century he might well place the name of Saint Philip Neri as progenitor. Although born in Florence and living as a layman during the first thirty-six years of his life, Philip is remembered as "the Apostle of Rome" and founder of the Oratory. Living between the years 1515-1595, this "funniest man in Rome" was father of "a numerous progeny" of souls who have since been declared saints of God.

Of the more than thirty-five eminently holy men and women who lived some space of their earthly lives during his eighty years Philip Neri was acquainted with ten. They were Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), Francis Xavier (1506-1552), Francis Borgia (1510-1572), Pius the Fifth (1504-1572), Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), Alexander Sauli (1533-1592), Felix of Cantalice (1513-1587), Catherine de Ricci (1522-1589), Camillus of Lellis (1550-1614) and Francis de Sales (1567-1622); and they may be said to constitute two distinct generations of saints.

Saint Ignatius Loyola will ever be the patron saint of those who take their reading seriously and, in consequence, accomplish truly extraordinary things. Popular imagination likes to conceive of him as a not so "cheerful ascetic," militaristic and possessed of an unusually determined will. Philip Neri, like Francis Xavier and others, knew him as a friend who could upon occasion display a very human heart. The two met at Rome in 1537 while Philip was yet a layman and Ignatius was laying the foundations of the Company of Jesus. Indeed, it was the unusual work of Philip as a layman that prompted Ignatius to compare him to a bell. For while he himself remained in the world the young Florentine directed others to enter one or another of the various religious institutes. Hence it was that Ignatius spoke of him playfully as "a bell which calls others into the church, while itself remains outside."¹

¹Capecelatro, Card. Alfonso, *The Life of St. Philip Neri*, (New York: 1926), p. 271.

Cardinal Capecelatro adduces evidence that Saint Philip was also acquainted with Francis Xavier.² The burning words of Ignatius: "What doth it profit a man . . .?"³ still ringing in his ears, the future "Apostle of the Indies" came to know the future "Apostle of Rome" before 1541, when he set forth on his "Odyssey."

Another Jesuit of whom Philip, now a priest, must have made the acquaintance, was Francis Borgia, former Duke of Gandia and third General of the Society. It is not improbable that the two met for the first time at the Vatican and were introduced by the Dominican, Pope Pius V; for the hearts of the three were as one, eaten up with a zeal for God's House.

With Pius V Philip Neri's relations were most intimate, both before and after the election of the holy Dominican. It was, in fact, Saint Philip who prophesied the outcome of the papal election of 1566. "The Pope," he declared, "will be Cardinal Alessandrino; he will be chosen without fail on Monday evening, although now no one speaks of him, and you, I am sure, have never thought of him."⁴ After the death of Pius, Philip preserved a white satin tunic and a slipper of red velvet which had been worn by his friend.⁵

Yet another of the distinguished friends of Philip Neri during this period was Cardinal Charles Borromeo. The equal of the others in his ardor for the reform of the Church, Charles surpassed them in the sufferings which he was made to endure for that ideal. Like them he furnished a marked contrast to the gaiety of the founder of the Oratory. Of the time and circumstances under which the two saints first met the biographers of both say nothing. It is probable, however, that it was during the Pontificate of Pius IV. Their first recorded meeting was at the death-bed of that Pontiff. Charles, twenty-four years younger than Philip, was a nephew of the dying pope and a member of the College of Cardinals which was to elect Pius V.⁶

An amusing story is told of the friendly relations which existed between the two men. It seems that during one of his last visits to the Eternal City, Charles submitted to Philip the Rule which he had drawn up for his Oblates of Saint Ambrose.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 271-2.

³ *Matth.*, xvi, 26.

⁴ Capecelatro, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

The older man advised the exclusion of the vow of poverty. Charles argued; Philip compromised. "We will," he said, "put it to the judgment of Brother Felix." Off went the two, in Saint Charles' coach, to the Capuchin convent of San Bonaventura, there to seek the advice of a lay-brother who could neither read nor write. Presented with the proposed Rule, Felix of Cantalice put his finger on one of the articles and said quite simply: "This is what should be effaced." It was the article which dealt with the vow of poverty. In the presence of what seemed the manifest judgment of Heaven, Charles could not but submit.⁷

There is a modern and very apt way of expressing a common human trait. It is called "passing the buck." Were one to have accused Saint Philip Neri of this failing he should probably have confessed his complete innocence and ignorance of its meaning. Yet, in his own way, he was guilty of this fault and in the presence of no less a person than Pope Gregory XIII. The unfortunate victim was another of Philip's friends, Alexander Sauli. It was the Jubilee Year of 1575. Father Philip was conducting a procession of many thousands on a pilgrimage to the seven great churches of Rome. By arrangement the group met, at San Lorenzo's outside the walls, another band of pilgrims among whom were the Holy Father and many dignitaries, both ecclesiastical and lay. Gregory expressed his satisfaction over the results of the pilgrimage, inaugurated by Philip years before. With the latter in mind (and very possibly within immediate vision) Gregory suggested that now would be a most excellent occasion for a sermon. Philip, however, apparently aware of the Pope's thoughts, answered that among those present was Monsignor Alexander Sauli, Bishop of Aleria, a holy man and an eloquent preacher. Alexander was commanded to preach. He did so and to the great spiritual profit of all present. History does not record what were his first words to Philip when next he saw him.⁸

Another Dominican, and the only woman, now a saint, with whom Philip Neri seems to have been acquainted, was Catherine de Ricci. Florentines by birth, they shared a common interest: devotion to the memory of that other Florentine who has wrongly been termed a forerunner of the Protestant Reforma-

⁷ Keogh, Rev. William French, O.C.D., art., "Saint Charles Borromeo," *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, III, 623. In his *Life*, Capecelatro gives a different version of this story, pp. 300-1.

⁸ Capecelatro, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

tion, Fra Girolamo Savonarola. Of the long years of this holy friendship there survives but a single letter from Catherine to Philip and the record of a single visit between them. This visit, which occurred around 1570, is unusual in that Philip did not leave Rome nor did Catherine penetrate beyond the walls of her cloister at Prato, near Florence. Some twenty years later when Saint Philip was shown an engraving of Catherine, now dead, he said: "This picture is not at all like Sister Caterina; her features were quite different." And, old man that he was, he fell to thinking of his friend and of that other Dominican about whom they had probably spoken.⁹

With the beginning of the Pontificate of Sixtus V in 1586 Saint Philip Neri found himself among the last survivors of an old order. A generation of saints was passing, leaving behind it the good odor of its holiness and zeal for the Bride of Christ. In 1552 had occurred the death of Xavier on the distant island of Sancian. Probably Ignatius had related the story of the death of his first spiritual son to Philip. Four years later Ignatius himself had died, confident that the work which he had planned so well would endure. In 1572 and within the space of several months Pius V and Francis Borgia had surrendered the burdens of their high offices. Fourteen years later and Charles Borromeo rested from his labors at the comparatively early age of forty-six. And so it was that Father Philip, old and white of hair and with the beauty of his soul appearing to all men, might well have sighed and smilingly murmured with the Psalmist: "This is the generation of them that seek Him, of them that seek the Face of the God of Jacob."¹⁰ Then, rousing himself, he might have chuckled; at any rate there was still Felix of Cantalice—and he had always been very much alive. Then, too, there was Alexander of Sauli, far from Rome and laboring among the Corsicans; Catherine de Ricci within her convent enclosure at Prato; and Camillus of Lellis whose work was prospering. There was to be another, although Philip did not know it yet; his name was Francis de Sales.

Felix of Cantalice has already been mentioned in connection with Philip Neri's relations with Charles Borromeo. Philip had long been an acquaintance of the illiterate Capuchin lay-brother, having often encountered him while the latter was begging for his convent of San Bonaventura. In him Philip recognized the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 427 ff. Capes, F. M., *St. Catherine de Ricci*, (London), pp. 250-1.

¹⁰ Psalm XXIII, 6.

true Wisdom of the Spirit and as the years passed and intimacy sprang up between them they would often exchange their most lofty thoughts and desires. It was, however, by reason of a new and further bond of union, which united them toward the evening of their lives, that these two will best be remembered.

Like all of the truly great, Philip Neri nourished no illusions about the Divine opinion of his real worth. Hence his earnest desire to disabuse the Roman people of their reverence for him. "He did not ask to be opposed, to be maligned, but simply to be overlooked. . . . And hence, you know, when he became so famous in his old age, and everyone was thinking of him mysteriously, and looking at him with awe, and solemnly repeating Father Philip's words and rehearsing Father Philip's deeds, and bringing strangers to see him, it was the most cruel penance to him, and he was ever behaving himself ridiculously on purpose, and putting them out from his entire hatred and impatience of being turned into a show."¹¹ From out of this hatred and impatience there arose what have come to be called the "whimsical sallies" of Saint Philip Neri. To Felix of Cantalice fell the lot of being the companion and accomplice of Philip in these strange doings which set Rome to scratching its head in utter bewilderment over its Apostle.

The most amusing of these "whimsical sallies" and one which savors of the *opéra-bouffe*, in the strictly Italian manner, was the incident which took place near the old Mint in the Via dei Banchi. The two saints had met and exchanged their accustomed greetings with the usual manifestations of love and reverence when Felix put a question.

"Are you thirsty, Father Philip?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the other.

"Well, then, let me see if you are really a mortified man."

With a grandiose gesture—one may be pardoned the supposition—Felix produced from his wallet a bottle which he proceeded to hand to Philip. The latter seized it eagerly, put it to his lips, and, in the presence of all the people, drank with demonstrations of evident relish.

"Come, now," he said, returning the bottle, "let us see what kind of a mortified man *you* are." And taking off his hat, Philip put it over the hood of the saintly Capuchin, saying: "Be off

¹¹ Newman, John Henry Cardinal, *Sermons on Various Occasions*, (London: 1902), p. 231.

now, with that hat on your hood, and finish your round of begging."

"Very well," replied Felix, "but if they take it from me, you lose your hat." And off he went, to the accompaniment of: "Look at Fra Felice with a hat on! Look at Fra Felice's hat!" from a chorus of delighted children.

At San Lorenzo in Damaso Philip recovered his hat and went his way, enjoying the puzzled looks of those who had witnessed the strange encounter. And so it was that, although the two saints might not have succeeded of their purpose to lose the respect of the Roman people, they staved off that crabbedness which generally comes with old age, and enjoyed themselves while doing it.¹²

It is interesting (however vain it may also be) to speculate upon what particular circumstances helped in the production of a saint. Camillus of Lellis may be taken as a case in point. He is invoked as a saint today and yet, upon two particular and important occasions, he chose to disregard the advice of his spiritual director. That spiritual director was Philip Neri. One is free to ask whether it was because of or, in spite of Camillus' disobedience that he is a saint.

Father Philip was convinced that Camillus would never succeed in becoming a Capuchin lay-brother; the troublesome wound on his leg would again open and he would be dismissed. So reasoned the spiritual director. But Camillus, converted from a wayward life of gambling and almost hopeless irresolution, was equally convinced that, in spite of his leg, he had been called to a place in the family of Saint Francis. Philip argued; Camillus disobeyed; the wound reopened and he returned, repentant and abashed.

The second occasion upon which Camillus chose to disregard Philip was of a more serious nature and with more far-reaching results. In Rome, Camillus had been engaged in caring for the sick at a hospital. Quite suddenly and without consulting his director, he determined to leave the hospital, taking with him the most capable members of the staff. Urged by Philip to return, Camillus declared: "I feel within me an immense energy to confront and overcome all obstacles and to found at once a congregation for the service of the sick; and I feel that the congregation will never have a real life of its own if it is

¹² Capecelatro, *op. cit.*, p. 404.

trammelled by hospitals or anything else." Philip appeared to be satisfied with this answer but he told Camillus to place himself under the direction of another. That this apparently harsh command was a manifestation of the saint's humility before what he recognized as the work of God seems obvious from the outcome. For Camillus, although he could not shake the resolution of Philip, proceeded with his work. He founded the Congregation of the Servants of the Sick, becoming, in the words of Father Martindale, "the first 'Red Cross' man."¹³ Camillus always retained an ardent affection for his former director who, in his turn, manifested a lively interest in the new religious institute. As for Camillus' Franciscan ambitions, they also were satisfied, for he is one of the glories of the Third Order of Saint Francis.¹⁴

In 1591 four short years before his death, Philip Neri looked upon the last saint whom he was to number among his friends during life. Francis de Sales, fresh from the celebrated University of Padua with his degree of Doctor of Law, stopped at the Eternal City while enroute to his home and family in Savoy. There it was that the old man of seventy-six embraced the young man of twenty-four and told him that he would be a priest and a saint one day. There is about that meeting something which savors of the Gospel story of the rich young man, especially as narrated by Saint Mark. "And Jesus looking on him, loved him. . . ."¹⁵ Unlike the young man whom Christ called to friendship with Himself, Francis was to accept the invitation and become priest, Bishop of Geneva, Saint, and Doctor of the Universal Church.¹⁶

This meeting with Francis de Sales may be regarded as a summation, a wholly fitting conclusion to the story of the saintly friendships of Philip Neri. Into all of those friendships he had injected his own individual spirit. Here in Francis, he saw and recognized a mirroring of that spirit. ". . . If I do not deceive myself," writes Cardinal Capecelatro, "Philip and Francis de Sales resemble each other so closely that we might at times mistake one for the other. If Francis had not been fifty-two years younger than Philip, and if he had lived with Philip in Rome, I

¹³ Martindale, C. C., S.J., *What Are Saints?* (London: 1935), p. 97.

¹⁴ Capecelatro, *op. cit.*, pp. 406-408.

¹⁵ Mark, x, 21.

¹⁶ Capecelatro, *op. cit.*, pp. 432-3. Moseley, Daisy Haywood, *Sunshine and Saints*, (New York: 1935), pp. 68, 99.

can imagine that never would two saints have been bound together with so mighty a bond of love. We find in each the same glowing love of God, the same gentleness and meekness, the same sunny smile, the same winning sweetness of speech, and the same intense zeal for the salvation of souls; even the charm of natural disposition, and the serene beauty which comes of unsullied purity of heart were alike in both; and in both we find that unlimited kindness and considerateness which is not weakness but the perfection of self-sacrifice."¹⁷ One may, then, he pardoned the supposition that during those moments something went out from Philip into the soul of Francis and that he returned home, determined not only to become a priest, but also to hand down to a changing world that spirit which he had always loved and now would make others love also. A new epoch had opened in the history of the yearning of men for their God, which is the spiritual life. The teacher was to be the Bishop of Geneva, all the more gentle and gay and human because he had once looked upon the gentle and gay and human "Apostle of Rome," who was Saint Philip Neri.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 432.

THANK GOD

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Thank God for birds and bees and little things,
For mountains, ocean, heaven's blue, and star,
For days of light, and nights of fearful dark;
Thank God for all we have, and were, and are.

Praise Him, Who brings us down on bended knee
In dreadful doubt, that, pausing in our pain,
He might approach and pour the soothing balm
And heal the wound, that seemed to bleed in vain.

Thank Him with silent love, with gracious deeds;
Praise Him from day-life's dawn till curfew late;
Love Him through life, through death—eternally;
Love's echo sounds in thanks—Thank Him and wait.