

The Beacon



*St. Philip Neri (1515-1595),
anonymous portrait, XVII
century*

When *Santa Maria in Vallicella* was rebuilt in the late sixteenth century (1575-1605), Rome was just emerging from a dark period of spiritual indifference, religious schism, and social decay. Many Renaissance popes had been worldly and corrupt, and the Protestant revolt had exploded throughout Europe, sending its soldiers to humiliate and pillage the Pope's capital (1527).

Santa Maria in Vallicella, the center of Philip Neri's reforming activities in Rome, became a beacon of spiritual and social renewal. It was immediately dubbed "Chiesa Nuova" (New Church) by enthusiastic Romans. That is still its preferred name among the people today.

Hard Times

Two important Counter Reformation innovators established their centers in the area where the Chiesa Nuova was to rise. Jesuit founder, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), situated his headquarters in Il Gesù just a few blocks away. Sant'Andrea della Valle, practically across the street, was built for the Theatine Order, founded by St. Cajetan of Tiene (1480-1547).

During the period from 1450-1550 the Church had suffered much. A string of pleasure-loving Renaissance pontiffs had corrupted the papacy and clergy, the people had been "paganized" by humanist culture and luxury, Protestant reform had snatched half of Europe from the Mother Church, and the Sack of Rome (1527) had reduced the Eternal City to rubble and ashes. Finally the Church responded with the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which redefined Catholic doctrine and reformed the clergy, and with several new religious orders, such as the Jesuits and Theatines, which by preaching and praying, educating youth and serving the poor, helped to bring about a Catholic revival.

The Institute of the Oratory was one of these new religious congregations, and its founder, St. Philip Neri (1515-1595) was perhaps the Counter Reformation's most appealing personality. St. Philip's tremendously popular Oratorians encouraged

genuine piety, active charity, urban renewal-and above all, joyfulness and compassion among the Roman population.

The Apostle Of Rome

Philip Neri, son of a Florentine lawyer, was born in a period of profound crisis for the Church and for Catholicism. He grew up in Florence with his two sisters under the care of a loving stepmother. As a boy he was playful and pious, known all over the city for his affectionate pranks. He spent much time with the Dominican friars of St. Mark's.



Interior of Santa Maria in Vallicella

At 17, Philip was sent by his family to be apprenticed to his wealthy uncle Romolo near what is now Monte Cassino. The vista of a prosperous commercial career repelled him, and the next year (1533) he left for Rome as a penniless young pilgrim. There he lodged with a fellow Florentine, Galeotto Caccia, whose two sons he tutored. Although beloved as a kind and innovative teacher, Philip spent much of his time praying and meditating in the Catacombs of St. Sebastian, where he was inspired by memories of the fervor and sacrifice of the early Christian community. The youth followed theology courses at Rome's Sapienza University and theology lectures at Sant' Agostino (1535-1538), earning warm praise from his professors.

Around 1540, Philip began the most important phase of his young life-13 years of prayer and work among the city's poor and suffering. He was particularly devoted to the crowds of pilgrims. This was entirely unusual for the times-a layman, all on his own-and moreover young, witty and fun-loving. Soon others flocked to attach themselves to Philip's apostolate-Romans of all ages and social strata. Philip was, however, a shrewd judge of character. To exclude the possibility of false, show-off piety, he reportedly required several aristocratic hopefuls to go about in ragged cloaks, or with foxtails attached to their breeches !



In 1548 Philip organized his followers into the Confraternity of Santissima Trinità (Most Holy Trinity) to assist poor and convalescent pilgrims, and founded the famous hospital of Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini. Finally, convinced by his spiritual director that he could better serve the Church as a priest, he was ordained in 1551, at the age of 36.

Father Philip moved into the Church of St. Girolamo, where he soon became one of the city's most sought-after confessors. He strolled the streets, playing games with the local orphans and loafers, instructing and inspiring them with his customary humor and informality.

To further encourage his penitents, Father Philip initiated a series of afternoon services-hours of lectures and informal religious discussions, interspersed with prayer, meditations, and beautiful music. All of Rome seemed to gravitate to these sessions-pious old ladies and neighborhood toughs, theology students and artists, society women in silks and furs, prostitutes, top Curia cardinals and religious reformers. A new room, called the Oratory, was constructed above the church to accommodate the clamoring overflow. Philip and his fellow priests became known as the Oratorians.

In 1575 Pope Gregory XIII approved the Oratorians as a group of priests "living together in community without vows, for prayers and preaching." He gave them the dilapidated church of *Santa Maria in Vallicella*, around the corner from Saint Girolamo, to establish their Congregation of the Oratory. The Oratorians immediately set about restoring and reconstructing their new home, handing brick and mortar to experienced workmen and spoiled noble postulants alike, to raise the *Chiesa Nuova* in record time.

On the day of the big move, the Oratorians marched in a bizarre procession from their interim headquarters at *S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini*, ceremoniously brandishing an assortment of battered household implements-frying pans, wooden bowls, brooms and dustbins, chairs and spits-to the delight of the Roman populace. Philip interrupted his parade to kick a few soccer balls-one of his favorite pastimes-with the neighborhood youth.

When Philip Neri died in 1595, all Rome mourned. He had truly contributed to the reform of the Church-purifying it with the simplicity of his thought, the charity of his actions, and the exuberance of his spirit. In the *Chiesa Nuova*, one tomb inscription for a simple parishioner commented aptly: "In gratitude to Saint Philip Neri, who was able to render cheerful the paths of the Lord, even in the most difficult of life's adversities."

Philip emphasized the joyful and inspirational role of music in the Church. The "oratorio" originated in the Oratorians' services. This dramatized form of (usually) sacred music, similar to opera, but without action and scenery, began with Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's (1525-94) compositions for the Oratorians. The genre was subsequently developed in masterpieces by Heinrich Schutz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Handel, and Franz Josef Haydn.

Cardinal John Henry Newman was attracted by the Oratorians' spirituality and simplicity. He joined the order and established the first English-speaking Oratorian center in Birmingham in 1847.

Backwards In Time

In witty and game-some Philip Neri's days, *Santa Maria in Vallicella* was known as "the joyous house." That had not always been the case.



St. Philip Neri's richly decorated chapel, left transept, Chiesa Nuova, with copy of Guido Reni's portrait.

St. Philip's *Chiesa Nuova* rose on the site of an earlier church called "in Vallicella," because it had stood in the valley of a small stream flowing into the Tarentum marshes. In remote times, the hollow depression was characterized by stagnant waters, sulfurous odors, and damp mists—perhaps even a cavernous hole. The area was so disagreeable, that pre-Republican Romans purported it to cover the Gates of Hell. They built a temple in honor of two important underworld deities, Dis and Proserpina, on that very spot. In fact, during the Oratorians' zealous excavations for their new center, they discovered—and reused or sold—some of the pagan marbles and statuary.

The earlier *Santa Maria in Vallicella* was supposedly founded by St. Gregory the Great in the sixth century (his statue and inscription decorate the church facade). Twelfth-century Church annals mention the building in relation to the sale of indulgences. (We suspect St. Philip would not have approved!) Throughout the Middle Ages the district was called *Pozzo Bianco* (white well), after its pride and joy—a marble drain top from imperial Rome standing in front of the church.

By Philip Neri's time, the neighborhood had become a melting (probably boiling!) pot of different classes and professions: bankers and thieves, painters and printers, courtesans and innkeepers, cardinals and functionaries in the pontifical Curia. The bustling and heterogeneous population offered ideal conditions for the Oratorians' apostolate.

The church boasted its customary miraculous icon. The Vallecillian Madonna and Child, frescoed on a hovel across the street (site of present apse), had been venerated throughout the Middle Ages. In 1535, after losing out in a hotly-contested street competition, a resentful ball-player hurled (or kicked) a stone at the revered image, which began to bleed from the cheek and neck. The picture was removed and placed

inside the sacristy, where it continued to work miracles. According to tradition, during construction of the *Chiesa Nuova*, the Vallecillian Madonna appeared to Philip Neri in a dream, warning him to replace a rotting wooden beam. Pietro da Cortona's nave-vault fresco shows the Virgin holding up the perilous rafter, thus saving workers and worshippers from a terrible catastrophe.

St. Philip had the original *Santa Maria in Vallicella* pulled down and replaced, according to plans by Matteo da Città di Castello and Martino Longhi the Elder, by a bigger and more beautiful construction. Work continued, with the generous patronage of Cardinal Pier Donato Cesi (dedication at the back of the church), and later of his brother, Bishop Angelo Cesi of Todi (even larger inscription emblazoned over main portal), from 1575 until Faustolo Rughesi completed the façade in 1605. The palazzo on the left of the church (now called the Oratory) was built (1637-1650) after a design by Francesco Borromini, as a residence and library for the Oratorians.

Inside The Chiesa Nuova

Santa Maria in Vallicella is very similar-inside and out -to other Counter Reformation churches in Rome. As the Jesuits' Il Gesù and Sant'Ignazio and the Theatines Sant' Andrea della Valle, it has a double-storied tripartite façade with scrolls. The interior appears to be one huge hall-like nave, with a shallow apse and five lateral chapels.

Philip Neri had wished the walls and vaults of his church to be left white and undecorated. The Baroque century which followed had other preferences, however. As is the case with the above-mentioned churches, the *Chiesa Nuova's* interior presents us with a wealth of stucco and gold whirls of painted angels and spiraling clouds, and swirls of blue and crimson draperies. Pietro da Cortona (Pietro Berrettini) was seventeenth-century Rome's most sought-after ceiling painter. In *Santa Maria in Vallicella*, this is not hard to understand. His frescoed vaults over the nave (the above-mentioned St. Philip's Vision of our Lady and the Falling Beam), cupola (Trinity in Glory), and apse (Assumption of the Virgin) are bright, dramatic and immediately appealing. It took Pietro over 20 years-on and off (1647-1669)-to complete these lively scenes.

Apart from these frescoes, the *Chiesa Nuova's* greatest treasures are three early (1607-1608) paintings by Peter Paul Rubens: over the main altar, Virgin, Child, and Angels, and on either side, St. Gregory the Great with SS. Maurus and Papius, and St. Domitilla with SS. Nereus and Achilleus. St. Gregory is represented as the supposed founder of the church, the others are Roman martyrs whose relics were brought to the church and placed beneath the main altar (1599). Under Ruben's oval Madonna (removable) is hidden the Vallecillian Madonna, protagonist of the two miracles mentioned above.

Philip Neri loved art as well as music, and his church is filled with many other lovely-if little-known-paintings. Worthy of note are Il Baroccio's (Federico Fiori di Urbino, d. 1612) splendid Presentation of the Virgin (left transept) and Visitation (fourth chapel from entrance on left). This last was Philip's most beloved painting. According to his biographer, the saint sometimes went into ecstasy in the Visitation Chapel.

The Assumption (fifth chapel on right from entrance, Aurelio Lomi di Pisa, d. 1622) caused a great stir in 1796, when the Virgin miraculously moved her eyes. The phenomenon was noted by almost all the Oratorians in residence. With pomp and

processions they declared a month-long festival, during which the miracle repeated itself, to the delight of Roman devotees.

Also worth a visit are Guido Reni's (d. 1642) Portrait of St. Philip, now in the saint's restored chambers (open to the public annually on May 26), and Alessandro Algardi's (d.1654) famous statue of St. Philip Neri and Angel and bronze Bust of Pope Gregory (who canonized St. Philip in 1622), both in the sacristy.

by June Hager

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