



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS ON THE FIFTH CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF SAINT PHILIP NERI

To the Reverend Fr Mario Alberto Avilés, c.o.

Procurator General of the Confederation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri

The fifth centenary of the birth of St Philip Neri, born in Florence on 21 July 1515, offers me the happy occasion to spiritually join the entire Confederation of the Oratory, to remember the one who lived in the *Urbs* for 60 years, earning the epithet “Apostle of Rome”. His existential path was deeply marked by the relationship with the person of Jesus Christ and by the commitment to guide to Him the souls entrusted to his spiritual care. On the point of death he advised: “He who wishes for anything but Christ, does not know what he wishes; he who asks for anything but Christ, does not know what he is asking”. From this fervid experience of communion with the Lord Jesus was born the Oratory, an ecclesial organization characterized by intense and joyous spiritual life: prayer, conversation and listening to the Word of God, preparation for a worthy reception of the Sacraments, formation in the Christian life through the history of the Saints and of the Church, works of charity in support of the poor.

Thanks also to the apostolate of St Philip, the commitment to the salvation of souls returned to be a priority in the Church’s action; it was again understood that Pastors must be with the people in order to guide them and support them in the faith. Philip led so many, proclaiming the Gospel and dispensing the Sacraments. In particular, he dedicated himself intensely to the ministry of Confession, until the evening of his last earthly day. His concern was that of constantly following the spiritual growth of his disciples, accompanying them in the hardships of life and opening them to Christian hope. His mission as “chiseler of souls” was certainly helped by the unique attractive force of his person, distinguished by human warmth, joy, meekness and gentleness. These particular attributes of his originated in the ardent experience of Christ and in the action of the Divine Spirit who expanded his heart.

In his teaching method, Fr Philip availed himself of the fruitfulness of contrasts: enamoured of private and solitary oration, he taught how to pray in fraternal communion in the Oratory; extremely ascetic in his penance, which was also corporal, he proposed the exercise of interior mortification marked by joy and the serenity of play; a passionate proclaimer of the Word of God, he was a preacher of few words, limiting himself to mere phrases when emotion gripped him. This was the secret that made him an authentic father and teacher of souls. His spiritual fatherhood shone through all of his work, characterized by trust in people, by spurning dark and dreary colours, by a festive spirit and joy, by the conviction that grace does not quell nature but heals it, strengthens it and perfects it.

St Philip Neri also remains a luminous model of the Church's on-going mission in the world. The perspective of his approach to neighbour in witnessing to all to the love and mercy of the Lord can serve as a valuable example to bishops, priests, consecrated people and lay faithful. Since the very first years of his life in Rome, he exercised an apostolate of personal relationships and friendship, as the privileged way to open people to the encounter with Jesus and the Gospel. His biographer thus attests: "He approached in a simple fashion, now this one, then that one, and everyone quickly became his friends". He loved spontaneity, avoided artifice, chose the most entertaining ways to educate in Christian virtue. At the same time he proposed a healthy discipline which entailed the exercise of willingness to receive Christ concretely into one's life. His deep conviction was that the path of holiness is rooted in the grace of an encounter — that with the Lord — accessible to who ever, of whatever status or condition, receives Him with the astonishment of children.

The Church's permanent state of mission requires that you, spiritual sons of St Philip Neri, not be content with a mediocre life; on the contrary, in the manner of the school of your Founder, you are called to be men of prayer and witnesses to draw people to Christ. Today, most of all among young people, so dear to Fr Philip, there is great need for people who pray and can teach others to pray. With his "intense love for the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, without which he could not live" — as a text from the process of his canonization declared — he teaches us that the Eucharist, celebrated, adored and lived, is the source to draw from in order to speak to the heart of men. Indeed, "with Christ joy is constantly born anew" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 1). May this joy, characteristic of the oratorian spirit, always be the underlying spirit of your community and of your apostolate.

St Philip turned lovingly to Our Lady with the invocation "Mother Virgin, Virgin Mother", certain that these two titles express the essential of Mary. May she accompany you on the journey of ever stronger adherence to Christ and in the commitment to an ever truer zeal in witnessing and preaching the Gospel. While I ask you to pray for me and for my ministry, I accompany these reflections with a special Apostolic Blessing, which I impart wholeheartedly to all the members of the Oratorian Congregations, to the laity of the secular Oratories and to those who are associated with your spiritual family.

From the Vatican, 26 May 2015

Franciscus

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