

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF ST PHILIP NERI  
YORK ORATORY, SATURDAY 26<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2018**

I would like to begin my homily by thanking the Provost, the Very Rev Fr Richard Duffield, and the Oratorian community here in York for inviting me to join you today for this your Patronal Feast Day. It is a great privilege and a pleasure for me to be here.

Now, I am sure that you will be familiar already with the basic historical account of the life of St Philip Neri. In my homily therefore I would like to reflect upon St Philip as a model and inspiration for us in our own day and for the work of evangelisation in the context of our society here in England.

The work of evangelization occurs most effectively when the Church engages the culture of those she evangelizes. In 1983, St John Paul II addressed the Catholic bishops of Latin America in Haiti and called for a 'new evangelization' - a theological concept of proclaiming the Gospel anew to those already evangelized. This new evangelization was to be new in "*ardour, methods and expression*", in ways that engage the present-day culture and modern society.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, St John Paul II described three circumstances for evangelization generally: firstly, preaching to those who have never heard the Gospel (*ad gentes*); secondly, preaching to those Christian communities where the Church is present and who have fervour in their faith; and, thirdly, preaching to those Christian communities who have ancient roots but who, I quote, "...*have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel*". It is that third circumstance which requires a 'new evangelization'.

It was, in many ways, that third circumstance which provided the context in which St Philip Neri grew up in Florence as a young man and lived out his mission for most of his life in the Rome of his day. It was a context which Blessed John Henry Newman described at great length in a homily he preached in 1850 at the Oratory in Birmingham, on the occasion of its first anniversary.

So what light can the life of St Philip Neri shed upon the urgent mission that we have today to preach to 'those who have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel'? What is the most effective element that we can take

from St Philip's example and cultivate in our proclamation of the faith and for the evangelization of our society?

In the first reading of our Mass today, St Paul sets before the Philippians one of the great, but perhaps too infrequently expressed, gifts of the Holy Spirit and qualities of the Christian life:

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

When St Paul wrote these words he was in prison in Rome and would have been aware that he was almost certainly facing the possibility of execution. Similarly, he knew that those Christians in Philippi faced all kinds of dangers and persecutions as they set out on their journey of faith. But Paul still proclaims, with a word that flows out of his own faith-filled heart – 'Rejoice'!

St Paul was teaching the Philippians, and us, that Christian joy is not dependent upon the immediate and ever changing circumstances of our lives but on the continual presence of Christ dwelling in our souls and living in our hearts. It is a joy which springs from the indwelling of Christ in the soul through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a joy which is nurtured in a state of mind and in an orientation of the heart.

St Paul goes on to explain how this nurturing of mind and heart is achieved:

*"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you."*

Here, St Paul is recommending more than just what people advocate today as positive thinking. When he talks about what they have 'received', the precise term he uses means to accept a 'fixed tradition'. This then is about living-out the apostolic faith which St Paul has handed on to us. By doing this, the gift of God's love will live within us and become the true source of our joy.

Even in prison St Paul could rejoice in the gift of the peace of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, and encourage his fellow disciples of the Risen Lord to live out in their lives the faith they have received. So too with St Philip Neri. There was much in his contemporary world and even in the life of the Church of his day that was oppressive, discouraging, even depressing. Yet everyone remarked on St Philip's joyful spirit. His joy in the Lord was quite simply irrepressible.

That joy, which springs from faith, can be a compelling and attractive feature that has the power to draw people closer to the point where they can hear and respond to the good news we proclaim in the Gospel. It was this joy, which emerged from the well of faith deep in the heart of St Philip Neri that had the power to attract those he encountered and draw them close to Christ.

Benedict XVI insisted that this joy was a key element in the work of evangelisation, he said: *"In a world of sorrow and anxiety, joy is an important witness to the beauty and reliability of the Christian faith. A yearning for joy lurks within the heart of every man and woman ...Far more than immediate and fleeting feelings of satisfaction, our hearts seek a perfect, full and lasting joy capable of giving 'flavour' to our existence. ...Each day is filled with countless simple joys which are the Lord's gift: the joy of living, the joy of seeing nature's beauty ...the joy of helping others, the joy of sincere and pure love"*.

Joy is of course intimately linked to love. They are inseparable gifts of the Holy Spirit. Love gives rise to joy, and joy is a form of love. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said: *"Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls; God loves a cheerful giver. Whoever gives with joy gives more"*. And, as Blessed Paul VI wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*: *"In God himself, all is joy because all is giving"*. The Church's vocation then is to bring joy to the world, a joy that is authentic and enduring.

St Philip lived through a period of history that was torn asunder with divisions of the most virulent kind, not least the divisions among Christians. Yet he rose above all the divisions as he did above all the discouragements. He showed that more was possible. He showed that faith was not merely about enduring the sufferings that accompany division but overcoming them with the spiritual gift of joy.

St Philip showed us that it is the apostolic faith which unites us to the teaching of Christ himself, and through Christ unites us with each other and to the knowledge and love of the Father. St Philip lived out that apostolic faith and passed it on in an exemplary way. His evangelization of the Rome of his day was certainly new in

*“ardour, methods and expression”*. His life was a confirmation that the apostolic faith when lived anew in every age can be for us a source of deep spiritual peace and joy, a joy that makes us want to share our faith - the source of our joy - with others. His example sets before us a sure and effective path to making Christ known in our own time and in the context of our contemporary society.

*“Be enthusiastic witnesses of the new evangelization!”* This is how Benedict XVI exhorted the young disciples of our generation. “Go” he said, *“...to those who are suffering and those who are searching, and give them the joy that Jesus wants to bestow ...You will see how it is contagious. You will receive a hundredfold: the joy of salvation for yourselves, and the joy of seeing God’s mercy at work in the hearts of others”*.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis emphasizes too that the preaching and spreading of the gospel must be carried out with the joy which comes from believing and living that gospel. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he builds upon the teaching of his predecessors when he declares, *“In this exhortation I want to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy”*. In the person of St Philip Neri, we have a model and guide for the work of evangelization today, an evangelization marked by joy.

Finally, as a word of encouragement to the Oratorian Fathers gathered here today for the celebration of this Solemnity of their illustrious founder and spiritual father, I would like to make my own the words from Pope Francis’s message on the occasion in 2015 of the fifth centenary of the birth of Saint Philip Neri: *“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’ ...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’. May this joy, characteristic of the Oratorian spirit, always be the underlying spirit of your community and of your apostolate.”*

I know, my dear Fathers, how dear and intense your love is too for Our Lord Jesus Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament. I pray, that through the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, your hearts will grow spiritually ever larger, like the heart of your holy father St Philip, with an immense

love for Christ her Son; and may the joy which comes from faith, shine brightly in your lives and draw many souls into the loving embrace of God our Father. Amen.

St Philip Neri...Pray for us!

**✠ Marcus Stock  
Bishop of Leeds**