

**HOMILY PREACHED BY FR JONATHAN ROBINSON,
THE FOUNDER OF THE TORONTO ORATORY,
ON SAINT PHILIP'S DAY 2002**

Dear Friends of the Toronto Oratory:

I am writing to tell you that the new Superior of the Toronto Oratory is the Very Reverend Martin Hilbert.

I have been officially the Superior from November the First 1975, when our Oratory was established by the Holy See; but for several years before that I was planning and working to turn my idea of an Oratory of St Philip into a reality. It has been a wonderful grace to be able to help bring St Philip to Canada, but after all this time and work the time had come for a change.

You may all be assured that this changeover will make no difference to the general direction of the Oratory. Indeed, one of the many blessings I have been given is to hand over the reins to a successor whose priestly ideals and aims are the same as mine.

Last St Philip's Day I preached a homily that set down some of my views about the mission of Saint Philip. Several people asked for a copy, and Father Hilbert has been kind enough to suggest that the homily ought to be enclosed with this letter.

In the meantime, I hope you will keep all of us, but especially Fr Hilbert, in your prayers.

Sincerely yours in our Lady and St Philip,

Fr Jonathan Robinson

Let the weak say: I am strong, and let him who is a sufferer become a warrior. Joel 3:11-12 (LXX)

In a passage that stands out even in *The Idea of a University*, a book which is full of memorable passages, Newman paints a brilliant picture of St Philip at the height of his influence. At the end of the passage Newman asks:

And who was he, I say, all the while, but an humble priest, a stranger in Rome, with no distinction of family or letters, no claim of station or of office, great simply in the attraction with which a Divine power had gifted him? and yet thus humble, thus unennobled, thus empty-handed, he has achieved the glorious title of Apostle of Rome.

'Let the weak say: I am strong, and let him who is a sufferer become a warrior.'

The victory is with the saints, but what are we to understand about this victory, and this warfare – for there is no victory without sacrifice and suffering. In thinking about this most crucial of all questions I want to say some simple things about St Philip, things prompted by a passage (written in 1850) by another great Oratorian, Fr Frederick William Faber. Father Faber wrote that 'The austerities which St Philip enforces or recommends are just those most suitable to Modern Times, the absence of comforts and teasing persevering plainness ... St Philip started a new element in spiritual direction, the heroism of common sense'.

Father Faber was right. St Philip is the Saint of ordinary life, with all its ups and down, with all its ordinariness. St Philip knew, as Dr Johnson was later to say, that:

It must be remembered that life consists not of a series of illustrious actions, or elegant enjoyment; the greater part of our time passes in compliance with necessities, in the performance of daily duties, in the removal of small inconveniences, in the procurement of petty pleasures, and we are well or ill at ease, as the main stream of life glides on smoothly, or is ruffled by small obstacles and frequent interruption.

But, St Philip also knew, as Father Faber so clearly saw, that this daily nitty-gritty of ordinary life can also be the school of sanctity for the believing Christian. To see God's will in the daily circumstances of our lives, and to try to do the duty each moment sends, is as open to the businessman as it is to the monk, it is as open to the housewife as it is to the scholar or the administrator. And so Philip said: 'Let persons in the world sanctify themselves in their own houses, for neither the court (he meant the Papal Bureaucracy – or as we would say nowadays the Chancery Office), professions, or labour, are any hindrance to the service of God'.

Again, although St Philip is the saint of the ordinary, he shows us that to live the ordinary in a serious Catholic way is anything but commonplace. Everyone has to live minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day. But very few people take advantage of this. To see the will of God in our daily lives and then to do it, and to do it willingly and not as Persian soldiers under the lash, requires great heroism. It also requires faith in the Providence of God as applying here and now to oneself, and the practice of the

virtue of hope in the unseen promises of God. God calls and God gives his grace for us to answer and to cooperate in the way he wants us to answer and to cooperate. But the faith and generosity not only to answer and cooperate, but to answer and to cooperate in the way God wants us to answer and to cooperate, that sort of faith and generosity seem to be in short supply.

Sanctity means allowing God to have his way with us, and most of us say no to God before we have gone very far down that road. And yet, what does our Catholicism mean, unless it means trying to put Christ, and the claims of Christ, at the centre of our lives? St Philip showed this love of God and detachment from the things of this world in a way that still compels; and he did this in the midst of the great City in which every door was open to him, and every honour his for the asking.

This is the very definition of a Christian, – one who looks for Christ; not who looks for gain, or distinction, or power, or pleasure, or comfort, but who looks 'for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ'. This, according to Scripture, is the essential mark, this is the foundation of a Christian, from which everything else follows.

Those are the words of Newman, words which apply to St Philip, but, unhappily, not to so many of the rest of us. We have become so sensitive since the Council to what are perceived as the dangers of the ascetical life, and of the vertical dimension of our faith, that we have all but forgotten that the Saints put the claims of God and the desire for Christian perfection, interpreted as doing the will of God in charity, at the centre of their lives. If we try to understand the holiness of the saints, without trying to understand

this deliberate and conscious effort to kill in themselves whatever they thought was opposed to the will of God, as well as to develop and order their talents according to the law of God, then we are not going to understand them at all. And, if we do not understand the ambition of the saints, how will we even begin our effort to lead a Christian life?

Philip was a reformer, but it was a reform based on love for Jesus Christ and him crucified. It was a reform based on love for the Church as the living, but wounded, mystical body of Jesus Christ. It was an intensely personal reform, and it was a reform which started with himself and not other people. The reform he sought to effect was the witness of the joy of a life given over to, and taken up into, the love of God. The life of prayer that went with this reform is open to all, but especially to the poor and the simple; for Christ himself had thanked the Father that he had 'hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes'.

In the *Idea of a University*, Newman the Oratorian pays tribute to his Father, St Philip, and sets a task for us all. St Philip, Newman says, 'lived in an age as traitorous to the interests of Catholicism as any that preceded it, or can follow it. Yet Philip saw that the mischief was to be met: not with argument, not with science, not with protests and warning, not by the recluse or the preacher, but by means of the great counter-fascination of purity and truth...he preferred to yield to the stream, and direct the current, which he could not stop, of science, literature, art and fashion, and to sweeten and to sanctify what God had made very good and man had spoilt.'

In a simple kind of prayer accessible to all, in teaching by example, in the sacraments and in the love of the *Santa Communita*, the holy community, St Philip found all that was needed for the beginning of the regeneration of his own age. Newman showed in his own time, and still shows us, 'the great counter-fascination of purity and truth'. In the situation in which we find ourselves we desperately need this 'great counter-fascination of purity and truth'. Furthermore, because sanctity is the vocation of all, it is up to us all, to follow St Philip, and all the saints, along the way that leads to the glory of God. 'Let people in the world sanctify themselves in their own homes'. On the Day of Judgement it will be no defence to say that we were too busy correcting the faults of others to have time left over even to begin the long, hard task of allowing the Good God to make us over into the image of his beloved Son. 'Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.' (Rom 12:11)

And so, as we turn to sing once more the great statement of our Faith in the Nicene Creed, and as we go on to share once again in the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, and as, with trembling hearts, we approach the All Holy in the Blessed Sacrament, let us pray for fidelity, for perseverance, for courage and for wisdom. And pray also for this House of St Philip, and for his sons, that we may, with you, go rejoicing to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And, 'let the weak say: I am strong, and let him who is a sufferer become a warrior'.