



The Oratory of Saint Philip Neri



The Oratory—The Early Years

2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the Foundation of our house. We'll be taking the opportunity in the next couple of newsletters to recall the history of the community through the reflections of the Fathers and Brothers and through our photo archives. We

hope that these remembrances will pay tribute to the inspirations and sacrifices that made this half century possible, remind or inform us of the formative stages of the Toronto Oratory, and give glory to God for the many graces He has bestowed.

The Origins

The Oratory began not in the part of Toronto called Parkdale, where we have spent more than forty-five years working and growing, but in Montreal. Fr Jonathan Robinson had been introduced to the idea of the Oratory much earlier and developed close friendships with many of the members of the English

Oratories. His priestly vocation and his experiences of Oratorian life abroad sparked the idea of Saint Philip's way of life in Canada. Father David Roche was there with Father Robinson from before the official foundation. These are his reflections on those foundational years.



1973 – Fr Robinson and the future Bishop Terrio in Montreal

❧ I MET FATHER ROBINSON AT the end of January, 1973, having been introduced to him through Father Paul Terrio, now bishop (retired) of St Paul, Alberta. Father Robinson suggested I join the prayer group he was forming. There were six to eight of us in the group, meeting every second week for Mass, discussion, and refreshments at St Patrick's Church, the English "Cathedral" in Montreal. In May of that year, Father Robinson, a university student, and I agreed to rent a house together and begin communal life. We had three simple rules—a half hour of mental prayer together, a communal meal on week nights, and weekly confession.

In the fall, Father Robinson proposed we buy a house, and we began living at 10 Springfield. In September, Father Paul Terrio decided he would join us. Father Paul Türks, the Apostolic Visitor for the Oratory, visited us frequently and was a great supporter of our project. On the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11 February 1974, Father Robinson wrote to Archbishop Grégoire for official permission to establish a *pia domus*, a pious house, the first step in forming a new Oratory. We received an affirmative reply on the feast of the Assumption, August 15th.

Our house was formally erected on the 1st of November 1975,

although the precise date is a bit vague. According to Father Robinson's diary, I got news from Father Charles Napier of the Brompton Oratory (where I was living as I completed my studies for the priesthood) and telephoned on November 14th, giving the news that the papal brief had been signed in October.

In 1975-76 we began negotiations on a larger, more institutional building, 1311 Pine Avenue. We built a chapel and began having public Sunday Masses, attracting supporters to our project. Father Robinson

Oratory house, Pine Ave., Montreal



Holy Saturday 1978 in Montreal



resigned as Chairman of the Philosophy Department at McGill, realizing that he couldn't do that and give full attention to the foundation and growth of the Oratory.

Father Türks made a canonical visitation of the house in the summer of 1978. I do not think we ever expressed any desire to move or any dissatisfaction with our ministry in Montreal, but I guess something in what we said might have revealed a concern over the shrinking English Catholic presence in Montreal because of the Quebec separatist movement. Out of the blue, he recommended that we investigate the possibility of moving to Toronto—not an order, but merely a recommendation. We took his recommendation to heart, and, after much prayer, decided to begin the negotiations.

By coincidence, or by providence, Emmett Cardinal Carter had been named the Archbishop of Toronto in 1978. He was originally a Montreal priest and knew Father Robinson personally. He welcomed us with enthusiasm, offered us Holy Family Parish, and said, if that didn't work for us, he would give us some other parish. We took possession of the parish on the 5th of September 1979. We put our heads down and did our work, attended diocesan meetings and retreats, didn't make waves, and established ourselves. And we are still here. ❧



Holy Family at the time of our arrival

The Move

The move to Toronto is one of the most important developments in the life of our house. Father Juvenal Merriell's life as an Oratorian began right as this move was happening. He gives us a more detailed account of the transition.



Br Juvenal and
Peter Bishop rehearse

☞ IN THE AUTUMN OF 1978 the Apostolic Delegate for the Oratories, Fr Paul Türks, visited Montreal. He advised the community to investigate the possibility of moving to Toronto. In pursuance of this advice Fr Robinson made contact with Archbishop G. Emmett Carter of Toronto. Negotiations continued into 1979 and eventually an agreement was worked out according to which the Montreal Oratory would move to Toronto and be entrusted with the care of the parish of Holy Family in the west end of the city. Fr Robinson and Fr David Roche visited Toronto at various times over these months.

When the decision to move had been accepted, the community in Montreal proceeded to put the house at 1311 Pine Avenue on the market in the early summer. For a length of time there were no offers. On the 11th of July Fr Robinson went to the Abbey of Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes to give a conference to the Benedictine nuns for the feast day of St Benedict. After the talk Fr Robinson saw the Abbess and she assured him that there would be an offer on the house when he got home. Back home he was greeted with the news that there had been three offers. Eventually one of these was accepted.

During the summer, I stayed with the community in Montreal and completed the month of postulancy. I was accepted for the novitiate, clothed in the habit of St Philip on the 3rd of September, and given a new name, Juvenal, after Blessed Juvenal Ancina of the Oratory.

The next day the move to Toronto began. On the 4th of September, Brothers Francis and Juvenal drove to Toronto. Father David Roche and Brother Ted Rys (who had entered the community in 1976) departed on the next day, and all stayed in the rectory at Holy Family. On the 6th of September, Father David celebrated the public Mass at 8:15 a.m., our first Mass in the parish. That evening Fr Robinson arrived by train, and the next morning we had morning Oratory at 7:45, after which Fr Robinson said the 8:15 Mass. ☞



1982 – Left to right: Br Juvenal,
Fr Robinson, A Christmas Tree,
Fr David

The First of Many Renovations

With the assistance of a generous benefactor, we were able to acquire and renovate the three houses adjacent to the parish rectory. The houses were in need of much work and were, of course, separate from each other. The renovations, completed in the spring of 1982, made rooms for the Fathers and Brothers and constructed common spaces for them to live the communal life more fittingly. A chapel

was constructed where the rectory garage had been and a new and larger kitchen and refectory for the community meals. The little strips of back yards were gradually transformed and unified into the Oratory garden, a real oasis in the midst of Parkdale. Many renovations would follow, but this first set allowed for community life to be lived in a far more regular way.

1982 – Conversion
underway



St Philip's Pantry

When the community moved to Parkdale, it was immediately clear just how much work was needed in order to help the poor and disadvantaged in the neighbourhood. The parish was filled with halfway houses resulting from the deinstitutionalization of the mental health care system in Ontario. Recent

immigrants also gathered here from all corners of the world. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society was very active visiting people and offering what help they could. Saint Philip's Pantry, offering simple grocery items, began from a back closet in the rectory and grew dramatically under Brother Ted Rys's guidance.

☞ WHEN THE ORATORY ARRIVED IN 1979, the St. Vincent de Paul Society was the only church group in Parkdale, Catholic or Protestant, that was providing assistance to the poor. That assistance was in the form of food vouchers that could be used for purchases at a local grocery store. At that point, Holy Family Parish was receiving about five calls for assistance per day. Within three years, due to the waves of immigration from troubled zones in the world, the number of calls began to grow exponentially. It was decided that the SSVP could use its financial resources more efficiently if it allotted a portion to the purchase of nonperishable food, which would then be distributed from the rectory.

In 1983 Sr. Marie Tremblay of the Sisters of St. Joseph founded the Daily Bread Food Bank, an umbrella organization which collected surplus stock from food producers and then redistributed it to charitable groups who dealt directly with the poor. We were one of the beneficiaries, and this greatly increased our supplies for redistribution while easing the financial burden on the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

At this point we were using the back seat and trunk of a car belonging to one of the priests to pick up the donations from the Daily Bread Food Bank. As the work of the food pantry continued to grow, the car proved no longer sufficient for picking up the supplies. This was when Father Robinson organized a fund-raising campaign to buy a cargo van. The food pantry also needed more storage space and a location where the crowds coming for help would be less intrusive to the other work done at the rectory.

So, the pantry was moved to the parish hall. It was also agreed that the St. Vincent de Paul Society would stay focused on home visitation and the Oratory would be take over the running of the food pantry, which was given the name St. Philip's Pantry. By the end of the 1980s, St. Philip's Pantry was handling 1000 visits per month. When it was handed over to the Parkdale community in the early 2000s, SPP was receiving over 2000 calls per month. ☞



1984-85 – The Seminary and Ordinations

The fall of 1984 marked the beginning of courses in what would become Saint Philip's Seminary. We wrote about the origins of the Seminary in our spring newsletter in 2024. That newsletter and others are available on the Oratory website. The seminary was originally intended for the education of our own candidates for ordination, but God had bigger plans in mind!

The first year of the seminary's operation coincided with two ordinations to the priesthood, the beginning of an outburst of vocations. In December of 1984, Father Juvenal Merriell was ordained a priest. Father Daniel Utrecht followed on the 20th of April 1985. It is amazing to think that it has now been forty years since those joyful celebrations.

A joint celebration!



The Toronto Oratory, age 10



Celebrations for the 10th anniversary

We marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the community in November 1985. We celebrated with a large meal, catered by the Fathers and groups of parish volunteers. The food was farmed out to many different kitchens, with roasts roasting away in ovens throughout the neighbourhood! Somehow it all came together in a very joyful way. 🌿



MONDAY, 26 MAY, AT 6 P.M.

A Sung English Mass in honour of Saint Philip

SATURDAY, 7 JUNE

A Mass at the grave of Father Jonathan Robinson in Orangeville, followed by a picnic at the Orangeville Reservoir

7-11 JULY AND 14-18 JULY

Oratory Theology Summer School

2 OCTOBER

The Oratory 50th Anniversary Gala

The Toronto Oratory of Saint Philip Neri
1372 King St. West, Toronto, Ontario M6K 1H3