

What Is The Oratory?

by Raleigh Addington of the London Oratory



SAINT PHILIP NERI (1515-1595)
FOUNDER OF THE ORATORY

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In many cities around the world, one can get on a bus and just say “The Oratory,” and the driver knows at which stop you want to get off. Why the Oratory, since an Oratory means a place for prayer, and all churches are that? The following pages are meant to explain.



We are frequently asked “What order do you belong to?” and the answer quite simply is that we are not a religious order at all, but secular priests living in community under a rule. But then people may ask, “how long have you been here?” and they are surprised if one says twenty or thirty years or more, because they assume that secular priests are moved about from time to time by the Bishop. But Oratorians are not like that either. A man enters the Congregation of the Oratory with the intention of staying and working in the same place all his life. Notice we say a Congregation of the Oratory, for not being an order, we are not moved around from house to house like members of an order.

There are two cardinal principles of the Oratory, and the first is that we are attached to our Congregation only by the bond of love

and common purpose and not by vow, oath or promise, so any Oratorian is free to leave his Congregation to join a religious order or become a priest working for the diocese. But once admitted to it after a probation of three years he cannot be taken from it or dismissed from it except for some grave offense.

The second principle is that each house of the Oratory is self-governing and independent from all others.

A man belong to the Pittsburgh Oratory or to the Rock Hill Oratory, to the Oratory of London or Rome or Munich. If the Oratory church is a parish (and not all are) it is subject to the local bishop in parochial matters, but in respect of its internal life, each Oratory is subject directly to the Holy See.

Saint Philip Neri and the Foundation of the Oratory

The Oratory was founded by Saint Philip Neri (1515-1595) in Rome. Like his friend Saint Charles Borromeo, Saint Philip is one of the great saints of the Catholic or Counter-Reformation, that positive movement which after the Council of Trent regained much of Central and Eastern Europe for the Church, met the challenge of Islam and Protestantism, and sent out a stream of missionaries inspired by Saint Francis Xavier to Africa, Asia and America. Saint Philip, though born in Florence, is called the "Apostle of Rome," where he lived for over sixty years. He reformed the moral life of the Eternal City, especially the Roman Curia (the Papal Court), from which in time his influence was spread by bishops, cardinals and even popes. His work at the heart of the Church may be compared with the more widespread reform of Religious life by Saint Ignatius (the Jesuits) and Saint Teresa (the Carmelites) who were canonized with him on the same day in 1622. It may also be compared with the future work of the founder of the English Oratory, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, who did so much to reform the intellectual life of 19th century Catholicism and by his influence even more in the twentieth.



Saint Philip was ordained a priest at the age of thirty-five after living for many years in Rome as a layman, spending much time, even whole nights in prayer in the catacombs, and engaging himself during the day in works of charity such as visiting the hospitals and serving pilgrims.

The “seed” or beginning of the Oratory may be found about 1552 when Saint Philip began to gather round him a small group of laymen who met informally in his room for prayer, spiritual reading and discussion. These meetings which gradually assumed a more definite form with

music and sermons were later moved to an “Oratory” or place for prayer (from the Latin, *orare*, to pray) over the church of San Girolamo. This is the origin of the name “Oratory” which was later transferred to the Congregation.

Later History of the Oratory

The Oratory spread rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries when it exercised considerable influence. Oratories were founded in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Germany, Mexico, South America,

Malta and India. The French Oratory founded by Cardinal de Berulle in 1611 is a centralized body quite distinct from the Oratory of Saint Philip, though akin to it in some ways.



Musicians, artists and architects closely associated with the Oratory include Animuccia, Palestrina, Victoria, Rubens, Pietro da Cortona, Guido Reni, Borromini, Juvara and Antonio Gaudi. The list of Oratorian writers, especially strong in history and archaeology, stretches from Baronius to the present day. Besides Saint Philip there are three other canonized Oratorians, Saint Luigi Scrosoppi (1804-1884), Saint Joseph Vaz (1651-171) and Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622). There are five Oratorian beati: Juvenal Ancina (1545-1504), Antony Grassi (1592-1671), Sebastian Valfre (1629-1710), John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) and Salvio Huix Miralpeix (1877-1936). There are also nineteen Oratorians whose cause for sainthood has been introduced (Venerables and Servants of God): Cesare Baronio, Francesco Maria Tarugi, Giovanni Matteo Ancina, Bartolomeo de Quental, Giovanni Battista Trona, Giorgio Guzzetta, Marco Antonio Ribaudengo, Luis Felipe Neri de Alfaro, Ignazio Capizzi, Emilio Venturini, Giovanni Battista Arista, Giulio Castelli, Filippo Bardellini, Raimondo Calcagno, Frdyndand

Machay, Jan Chryzostom Michalkowski, Agusti Mas Folch, Martin de Bonilla y Echevarria, and Francisco Perez Navascues.

Some Oratories were suppressed during the eighteenth century (for example, all the Portuguese Oratories by Pombal); others disappeared during the French Revolution and under the reign of Napoleon and, in Italy, many more during the Italian Risorgimento (1859-70). The modern revival of the Oratory can probably be dated to Newman's decision to found a Congregation of the Oratory in England. After making his novitiate in Rome, he began the English

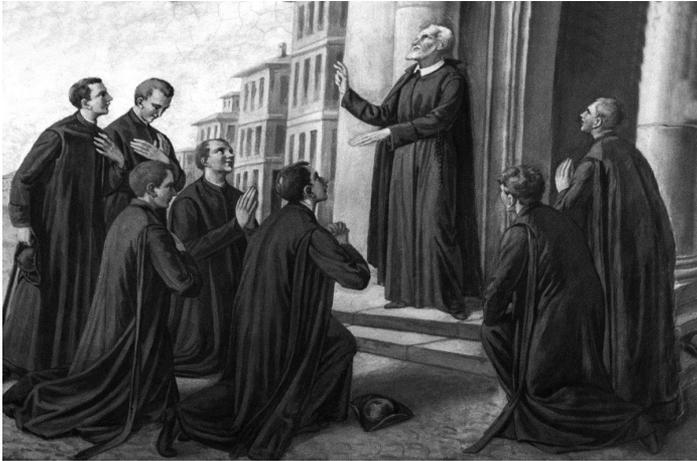


Oratory (established by a Papal Brief of Bl. Pius IX) at Old Oscott, renamed Maryvale outside of Birmingham on February 1, 1848. In 1849 Newman sent Father Faber and several others to start a new Oratory in London, which became an independent house in 1850, now the Brompton Oratory.

Until 1933 there was only a number of autonomous and independent Congregations of the Oratory, each using the constitutions approved by Pope Paul V in 1612. These were the Constitutions of the Roman Oratory, which other Oratories were entitled to use. Thus the English Oratory was established by Papal Brief, using Newman's modification of the original Constitutions by special privilege, and all later revisions of the Constitutions of the Oratory including the most recent of 1988 have been based on the text of 1612.

The first General Congress held in Rome in 1933 established Constitutions for the Oratory as a whole, which thus became for the first time a body, or as the Canon lawyers say a "moral [juridical]

person” capable of possessing property and having rights. It became the “Institute of the Oratory,” which name was changed to the “Confederation of Congregations of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri” at the General Congress of 1969. The Confederation was established by the Apostolic See so that the Congregations might help each other effectively, while preserving their original autonomy.



The General Congress meets every six years, can only change or revise the Constitution with the consent of the Holy See and has no powers of common government. It elects the Delegate of the Apostolic See, who has the duty of visiting all of the Oratories, the Procurator General, and the Permanent Deputies of the Confederation.

Today there are more than ninety Oratories around the world. The Oratory is being successfully adapted to many different environments and apostolates, with several more houses proposed or in formation.

The Vocation of an Oratorian

An Oratory is governed as regards day-to-day affairs by a Provost or Superior (known simply in the house as “the Father”) assisted by deputies, all elected for three years by those Fathers, or members, with a vote. More important matters must be brought to the General Congregation which consists of all the Fathers and which has supreme authority. It is a democratic form of Constitution, with the stress on freedom, personal responsibility, self-discipline and de-centralization.

One of the principles of Saint Philip’s Oratory was that normally the Fathers lived at their own expense and contributed a pension for their keep. Though this is still the ideal, an Oratory today, like any diocese, welcomes all the suitable candidates it is able to support with or without private means.



Lastly, it may be asked: if the Oratorians are secular priests, why does a man enter a Congregation of the Oratory? How is it a special vocation? In the first place it must be because he is attracted by the person of Saint Philip Neri, and wants to work for the good of souls in his spirit. It will also be because he feels the need, or at least

appreciates the value of Community life for pastoral and apostolic work and effectiveness, because he will find in the Oratory rather more opportunity for prayer, reading and writing than the circumstances of the average priest in a city will afford, and because he likes to “stay put,” being prepared to exercise the priestly ministry in a restricted sphere without limelight. These considerations are

particularly important today when some priests complain about loneliness and isolation in their living situations. If the sense of community is to be revived in the Church it might well start among the clergy.

It is remarkable that out of such a small body of men in every century, including our own, the Oratorians have given Cardinals and Bishops to the Church. But according with the Founder's spirit, it is written into the Constitutions of the Oratory that no dignity may be accepted except at the command of the Pope. "Only give me ten truly detached men," said Saint Philip, "and I do not despair of converting the world with them."

Further Reading

Addington, Raleigh, *The Idea of the Oratory*

Matthews, V.J., *St. Philip Neri* (Tan)

Murray, Dom Placid, *Newman the Oratorian*

Trevor, Meriol, *St. Philip, Apostle of Rome*

Turks, Paul, *Philip Neri, The Fire of Joy* (Alba House)

Velez, Juan, *Holiness in a Secular Age, The Witness of Cardinal Newman*

Robinson, Jonathan, *In No Strange Land, The Embodied Mysticism of Saint Philip Neri*

Ninety-Seven Oratories Throughout The World

Italy (20)

Rome | Naples | Palermo | Brescia | Bologna | Perugia | Florence | Guardia Sanframondi | Genova | Torino | Mondovi | Verona | Vicenza | Biella | Chioggia | Acireale | Cava de' Tirreni | Acicatena | Prato

Spain (12)

Barcelona | Palma de Mallorca | Alcala de Henares | Sevilla | Vic | Barcelona-Gracia | Porreres | Soller | Tudela | Albacete | Sevilla - Blanca Paloma | Getafe

Germany (9)

Aufhausen | München | Leipzig | Aachen | Frankfurt am Main | Dresden | Heidelberg | Celle | Hannover

United Kingdom (6)

Birmingham | London | Oxford | Cardiff (in formation) | Bournemouth (in formation) | York (in formation)

France (3)

Nancy | Dijon | Hyeres

Poland (8)

Gostyn | Poznan | Studzianna | Tarnow | Bytow | Radom | Tomoszorw Mazowiecki

United States (13)

Rock Hill, SC | Monterey, CA | Pharr, TX | Pittsburgh, PA | Philadelphia, PA | Brooklyn, NY | New Brunswick, NJ | New York, NY | Cincinnati, OH | **Oratories in Formation:** Red Bank, NJ | Detroit, MI | Washington, D.C. | Kalamazoo, MI |

Mexico (10)

Puebla | Mexico - La Profesa | San Miguel de Allende | Orizaba | Guanajuato | Leon | Tlalnepantla | Mexico - San Pablo | Mexico - N. S. De la Paz | Merida

Columbia (3)

Pasto | Ipiales | Bogota

South Africa (2)

Oudtshoorn | Port Elizabeth

Other (11)

Wien, Austria | Zurich, Switzerland | Vilnius, Lithuania | Maastricht, Netherlands | Toronto, Canada | Sao Paulo, Brazil | Villa Alemana, Chile | Heredia, Costa Rica | Mercedes, Argentina | Port Antonio, Jamaica | Brisbane, Australia (in formation)



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