

26. May 2021

St. Philip Neri
“The Humorous Saint”

Phil 4:4-9

Always be joyful, then, in the Lord; I repeat, be joyful. Let your good sense be obvious to everybody. The Lord is near. Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, let your minds be filled with everything that is true, everything that is honourable, everything that is upright and pure, everything that we love and admire - with whatever is good and praiseworthy. Keep doing everything you learnt from me and were told by me and have heard or seen me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

Today we take a look at St. Philip Neri and take the reading which is for his memorial.

Philip Neri was born in Florence in 1515. He came to Rome at the age of 21 and lived there in extreme austerity until his death. His life was prayer, charity, pastoral care, penance. His main concern was the moral renewal of Rome. In accord with his sunny disposition, he held cheerful, witty and smart conversations with street urchins and simple people, but also with merchants and artists, which earned him the nickname of “the humorous saint”. Philip Neri spent up to 15 hours a day in the confessional, for personal pastoral care was for him the key to new Christianisation. Since the saint was already regarded as such during his lifetime, he did everything to avoid appearing as a saint; thus he sometimes appeared with a half-shaved beard, sometimes with a fur coat in summer, sometimes with pink felt slippers. He did nothing unusual, but always did it unusually well according to his motto: Do the ordinary unusually well and remain joyful at the same time.

In our meditations in preparation for Pentecost we considered joy as a gift of the Holy Spirit (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR9zZbFh5Mo>), that joy which arises from the relationship with God. There are people - and St Philip Neri seems to have been one of them - who by their very nature bring with them a basic affirmation of life from which cheerfulness can grow. If the “sunny disposition” is taken into service by the Holy Spirit and formed accordingly, this person cultivates an intimate relationship with God and rejoices in the Lord at all times, as St. Paul

recommends to us today right at the beginning, then we can easily imagine St. Philip Neri.

The saint gained great influence on people and was called the “Second Apostle of Rome”. His way of pastoral care was oriented towards real life and humorously pointed out the sore points in people. He saw the self-denial demanded by the Lord (*cf. Mt 16:24*) not only realised in an ascetic way of life, but also in the fact that as a Christian one should not be too embarrassed to expose oneself to public ridicule, to speak and act self-ironically and thus practise humility.

It is a blessing to get to know the saints of our Church in their different ways and thus to see how God in His infinite diversity glorifies Himself in them! Neither a “gloomy and morose Christianity” which suppresses all joyfulness at the outset is attractive, nor is a Christianity which is disguised by a false joyfulness and therefore seems banal.

Philip Neri prayed without ceasing. His intimate relationship with Jesus gave him the strength for the great work the Lord was doing through him. In 1548, together with his confessor, he founded the Confraternità di SS. Trinità, the Confraternity of the Most Holy Trinity, a society of lay people to care for needy pilgrims, the sick and the poor. In 1552 he founded the Institute of the Oratory, a congregation of secular priests and clerics, which was confirmed by the Pope in 1575. Their mission was that priests promoted salvation through daily prayer, spiritual discussions and tireless hearing of confessions.

Let us look at two points of his rich life, which can serve our path of discipleship:

1. The humorous pointing out of sore points

This is a really good way in pastoral care, because it helps the other person to look at what needs to be worked on and at the same time to keep an emotional distance. Usually people are very affected when mistakes are pointed out to them. The use of the right humour, however, accomplishes the art of addressing even serious things, but with the invitation not to take them “brutally in earnest”, which would immediately create a kind of “value problem” in the other person. One can even speak of a loving humour. When the other person feels this, humour becomes a bridge to release oneself from self-cramp and possibly even to be able to laugh at oneself.

2. Self-irony

If the person who wants to help others to progress on their spiritual path also cultivates self-irony, then it becomes even easier. Self-irony will convey to the other person that one is not perfect oneself and knows one's own faults well. This is very helpful in spiritual counselling, but also for one's own path of discipleship. A healthy self-irony goes hand in hand with the so important self-knowledge. It even manages - if it is not exaggerated - to deal with one's own shortcomings in a somehow “compassionately smiling” way and yet attentively. This also has an effect on the conversation with God. One entrusts oneself to the Lord even more easily and self-evidently, knowing well of His love and patience with us.

In this way, a looseness and distension comes into our spiritual path, which, however, does not lead to carelessness in the face of the challenges of following Christ.

Thus, through St. Philip Neri, God gives us a loving reminder that the seriousness of discipleship goes very well with joy and serenity, and is a very fruitful union that can win people to the faith.