

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST PHILIP NERI

BY

F. VINCENT READE, Cong. Or.



HE who undertakes to write upon the spirituality of St Philip Neri is by his very task pledged to avoid ponderosity, yet the writer of these few lines does not know how to escape the need for some kind of introduction to his remarks. The need arises, not from the nature of his subject but from the fact of the appearance of his essay in a periodical devoted expressly to 'spirituality'. For we who here write could not be comfortable in saying what we want to say and propose to say unless first we made clear that throughout we shall have in mind two presuppositions. The former of these is that the very function of a journal of spirituality is to present to its readers *in toto* all the various ramifications and different types of Christian sanctity and ascetic which are approved by the Church, in order that its readers may discover, learn, assimilate, or on the other hand set aside what they find, according to their own needs, circumstances and spiritual trend—the corollary of which is that we ourselves are allowed to speak as we feel, and are to be excused if occasionally we seem to be overpraising the special spirit of our own saint and thus indirectly depreciating other spirits and other saints; than which nothing could be further from our mind and intention, just as nothing could be further from what was in his lifetime the attitude of Philip himself. Our other presupposition is that in a brief disquisition upon the spirituality (whether as exhibited in action or as embodied in teaching) of any given saint emphasis must fall precisely upon that in him which differs from what we find in other saints rather than upon that which is common to all. Much therefore will here be passed over which is intrinsically important and even crucial from the point of view of sanctity, and which we may be sure was brought out to the full in the process of canonisation, wherein the opposite course to our own must necessarily have been pursued, since there the matter in hand was precisely to prove that Philip Neri had displayed in his life the very same characteristics which are found in all the other heroes and heroines of sanctity whom the Church has raised to her altars. And surely this very fact as to the 'process' justifies us in proceeding here and now along the other path? For if the Church has officially guaranteed that Philip exhibited in his life the whole complexus of transcendent qualities which form the hallmark of a

saint, why should we, out of our nothingness, tediously and meticulously affirm the very same thing?

St Philip moreover pre-eminently belongs to no ascetic type; if ever a saint was *sui generis*, surely it is he. True, every saint, if only we knew enough about him or her, must have been notably individual and entirely himself or herself; and the nearer we get to any of these extraordinary personages the more clearly do we see that all of them were psychological solitaries. Nevertheless, types of sanctity there have been in such sense that we can correctly speak of, for example, saints of the desert, hermits, pillar saints, abbots, missionaries, founders of religious orders, reformers of ecclesiastical life, and so forth; and it almost necessarily follows that individuals in any of these groups will have certain marked features in common. Philip however was none of these things, and we cannot find any group in which he can be placed. It is true that he was called the 'Apostle of Rome'. It is true that he brought about, or contributed largely to a marvellous reform of Roman society and of the court of Rome, and in his later life actually influenced the public policy of popes—though only, it would seem, of popes who had been under his influence previously to their elevation to the papal throne. Yet he set out to do none of these things, and even while he was doing them he seemed unconscious of the fact. Similarly, if he was the founder of a religious congregation that came about almost by accident and without planning on his own part. All these works in very truth were but the effluence of his own personal life and the resultant of casual personal contacts with other men. The Congregation of the Oratory itself indeed was and is nothing else than a kind of extension of the personality and personal work of St Philip himself, embodying his unconventionality and independence, scheduled for no particular work except that of ministering to the souls who in the surge of life come within its ambit, its sons unperipatetic and 'always there'. just as was their Father and Founder, who would never leave Rome.

What, however, was 'special' in St Philip, besides his being a saint and a secular priest? What makes him so striking a figure in the annals of the Church, as he is almost universally allowed to be? What, in fact, is the 'spirituality' of St Philip Neri, that problem or phenomenon with which the title of our present essay compels us to deal? We can but endeavour, according to our capacity, to visualise and throw into relief some traits and trends of the character and teaching of this elusive saint, who spoke so little, who preferred to live in obscurity and to be laughed at, who nevertheless has attracted the admiration of geniuses, and whose feast was for two centuries a day of obligation in the city of the popes.

In the first place, then, let us say that nothing was more characteristic of this untheoretical yet (because really a saint) divinely-guided simple priest than his consistently maintained attitude towards all humanity of universal geniality and hopefulness—tempered, however, though in no sense detracted from, by a humorous touch of kindly cynicism. No world of fixed moral and spiritual classes was before the eyes of our saint; no men were wholly good and none were wholly bad—and especially was this true of the young. Far from the truth, in the view (not consciously thought out, perhaps) of Philip, was the division of mankind into the elect and the reprobate, with the former as a spiritually perfect minority pursuing its anxious way through a wicked world from which the elect must at all costs keep themselves uncontaminated and separate. No—all men were convertible; none reprobate; none irretrievably fixed in malice. And on the other hand, when youths were praised for their virtue and piety, he would say: 'Yes, but wait till they are fledged and then see what kind of a flight they will make'. He was unready to canonise any before their death, or to blind himself to the shortcomings even of those eminent in the Church or in general esteem—yet only because to him all men were human, and all shortcomings pardonable. Philip, we may say, jumped a whole era in the history of the Church, an era—beginning perhaps in the 14th century and not running out its course till the verge of the 19th century (with the final extinction of Jansenism)—an era when men's minds tended to be darkened by a dismal and distorted view concerning 'election' and 'predestination', by a cloud which was dispelled in the long run by the devotion of the Sacred Heart. But the saint at whom we are now looking stands outside the whole of this phase of feeling; taking us back even to the joyful supernaturalism of the Apostolic Age and leading us on to the age of Lacordaire and Ozanam, of St Joseph Cottolengo and St John Bosco, yet remaining ever himself with a supernaturality entirely his own, pre-eminent and unique. In looking at Philip and his life we seem also to forget the fierceness of the Protestant controversies which belong to the days in which he lived (though he knew of them so well); we forget the marring of catholic thought and feeling to which those controversies gave rise; we forget the gloom of the Spanish Inquisition and the terrors of the pontificate of Paul IV (though our saint was himself not unaffected by it); we forget the domestic quarrels between 'religions' within the Church, for Philip was friend and supporter of all of them. And surely in the easy and speedy canonisation of this Florentine saint who dwelt perpetually in Rome the Church set her seal upon geniality and cheerfulness, and in so doing canonised, we might almost say, the spirit of

Florence and of local Rome; for when was Florence uncheerful, or Christian Rome unurbane?

Completely in harmony with this general serenity of spirit and tolerance of mind in St Philip Neri were two notable and persistent features in his guidance of others, whether laymen or priests. The former of these was a principle which contrary to his custom he embodied in a constantly used phrase: 'For changing from a bad state to a good state no thought or hesitation is called for; but for changing from a good state to a better one it is otherwise, and much consideration is needed'. And in general he preferred that when men received the divine call to higher spirituality they should not change their state of life but should endeavour to serve God better in the state in which they found themselves. Hence, though Philip sent many of his penitents into Religious Orders, yet he is on the whole the saint of the layman and of the secular priest. The second of these characteristics, and it seems to belong to our saint pre-eminently and almost uniquely, was one which we will venture to specify by using a homely English phrase: he was consistently anxious that good people, and especially his own disciples (above all perhaps his priest sons) should not 'take themselves too seriously'. This latter principle Philip of course applied vigorously to himself, and though in his biographies we find the resultant treated mainly as humility (and therefore somewhat conventionalised) it was in reality something wider and deeper than that. Humility it was, but something more, at once a marvellous sublimation and a strident proclamation of that virtue, rendering it practically understandable to the many, crying aloud its transcendent importance. Here is a notable instance of what one of Philip's early priest-disciples describes as the saint's *domestication* of Christian virtue; and it was moreover an offshoot of a distrust and dislike of the highflown and sensational in religious devotion which we find as a constant, yet with many ramifications throughout the life of our saint. Thus he distrusted visions and visionaries; and once when one of his sons was enlarging eloquently in a sermon upon the gloriousness of suffering for Christ, the saint first noisily interrupted the preaching, and then, mounting the pulpit himself, proclaimed that so far as the members of his own Congregation were concerned (the preacher himself being by implication included) their priesthood up to that time had brought them not suffering and contempt but honour and esteem.

Nevertheless, this homely, humorous, informal saint was a superlatively supernatural personage; the roots, the sources, the springs of all his actions were in the unseen world; through his very eccentricities and comicalities the light of heaven never fails to shine; the

older biographers are here in the right. And at this point we cannot refrain from entering a *caveat* as to some modern hagiography. We ourselves have no great devotion to the conventional pious biographies (with their lamentable tendency to turn saints into ninepins), but some modern writers, with the best possible intentions, seem to us to be not very happy in their efforts to arrive at something better. The life of a saint should by all means be truthful, sober, critical, genuinely historical, but the pity is that some rightly-intentioned and well-equipped authors have fallen into one or both of two fatal errors. One of these is to assume too readily that to be 'critical' is to eliminate as far as possible the supernatural. The other is to suppose that a saint cannot be helpful to us unless he is so humanised as to be after all very much like other people. Both of these errors have a basis of truth, but it is truth distorted, and so distorted as to become in a deep sense untruth, and a kind of untruth which tends to depress the level of Christian and catholic life by depriving that life of idealism and inspiration. Then, as to the subject of our present disquisition, a non-supernatural and rather 'ordinary' Philip Neri is to our mind not a historical figure, not any more than would be a non-supernatural Paul of Tarsus or John the Beloved Disciple. The earliest and most reliable biographies of our saint depict for us a life so immersed in the world of supernal forces that particular miracles (not in our view the most important part of the supernaturalism of sanctity) seem but the natural and almost inevitable outflow of a life that is in its whole substance above the natural. What we find in Philip is that though he lived in the turmoil of what was then the most cosmopolitan and most highly civilised city in the world, though the whole tide of life surged round him and he did not shrink from it, though even to the very end of his life he entertained a constant stream of visitors in his room, maintained a variety of social contacts and was not untouched by the public events of the whole continent of Europe (and indeed of the New World), yet he never ceased to live in the atmosphere of mystical prayer and sank deeper into that atmosphere by a kind of inevitable gravitation whenever he was left free and alone, whenever there was not at his side some soul of man which he could help by his smiles and caressing words. As his life went on this absorption in prayer increased, and during the final few years of that long and active life his daily Mass took three hours or more to accomplish owing to the intensity of a devotion which at last refused to be restrained. Philip Neri, it would seem, lived wholly and entirely in the two worlds to which we all of us in some sense belong, the seen and the unseen. He united in himself those two worlds and made them into one. It is said of a certain kind of people

(very delightful people, surely) that they 'bring out all the good that is in others'; and it might be said truly of Philip that he did more; he brought out all the good that was in the world, in that world which we see and feel all around us, the whole motley and complex pageant of the life of man. Yet Philip himself was all the while living also in another world, hidden with Christ in God.

Perfectly in harmony with this duality in the saint's own life was his way of dealing with the souls who submitted themselves to his influence, a way, let us observe, that was spontaneous and animated by instinctive sympathy rather than proceeding upon any thought-out system or method (Philip did not know that dismal word psychology). For while his unceasing endeavour was to lead men far in the road of spirituality and good works, yet he avoided asking of them more than they could bear. He took men as and where he found them and led them step by step, rarely advising (as we have noted above) any sudden and drastic change in their mode of life. He may perhaps have had in mind a half-conscious thought of sanctifying thus the whole world of men in all its aspects and phases, but it also seems that, ever in contact with the whole general efflorescence of the life of man in the world, he loved in that life all that was genuinely natural, and tolerated much that he could not wholly love. He wished every department of human life to be sanctified. He feared causing average people to throw up the sponge by laying heavy burdens upon them; yet may we not also say that he so loved each human individual as to be unwilling to turn him into something that he really was not? Upon all, it is true, he imposed cheerfulness and humility, but even in respect of this last-named virtue, which Philip prized above all other virtues, our saint used great discretion. Not all of his penitents were ordered to carry large dogs or pots and pans through the crowded streets, or to deliver loud-voiced, preposterous messages in the shops. And here we arrive at the other facet of Philip's direction of souls. Never was he content with a low level of final attainment; far from his mentality was it to be satisfied with a lay catholic life which was in the main purely natural, but just punctuated by sporadic religious duties—a mechanical performance of set prayers, Mass on days of obligation and occasional approach to sacraments. On the contrary, he seems ever to assume that each true christian is (according to his capacity) in personal touch with God through Christ; that all should expect answers to genuine prayer, and should look for supernatural results in the use of sacraments. He seems to have held that all men were capable of mental prayer, or at any rate that such prayer was in no way inconsistent with ordinary life in the world. The basic spiritual aids provided in and

enjoined by the Church and open to all—prayer, the word of God, the sacraments: these, in Philip's view, are sufficient to lead souls to the spiritual heights; and from their rightful usage it is impossible to expect too much.

In the light of these observations we hope to be acquitted of extravagance if we suggest that if St Philip Neri may be rightly called the saint for the ordinary man, he may also be regarded as in a special way the inspiration of the 'mere' priest, by which we mean the priest as priest; the one who has taken no vows, possesses no jurisdiction, has no official cure of souls, is not detailed for any specific work; the one whose business in life is just to pray, to preach to the ordinary run of the faithful, to offer the holy sacrifice, to hear the confessions of and give holy communion to the mixed and perhaps rather undistinguished crowd. The life and work of Philip (who only in his later life was sought out by persons of celebrity and distinction) proclaims to such that their own life and work may be sublime, and that no spiritual heights are denied to them. As we have said above the underlying idea of the Congregation which Philip founded (or, we would rather say, which grew up around him) is that of a body of 'mere' priests, of priests who see no higher vocation than that of fulfilling as perfectly as possible the duties of the priest as priest.¹

Perfectly in harmony with this unvarying trend or trait in St Philip do we find certain more detailed features in his practice and precept, one or two of which have already been mentioned. No doubt it was partly because our saint himself was called by God to guide not lonely and exceptional souls but the whole generality of mankind, no doubt, we say, it arose from his own vocation, but Philip's dislike and distrust of visions and visionaries was extreme, and the disquiet and discomfort which he experienced in connection with a Sister Orsola Benincasa makes curious but most interesting reading. He believed that the servants of God received personal inspiration and direction but he greatly feared delusion, hated the *bizarre* in religion, and vastly preferred the ordinary and safe ways, virtue and good works, prayer and duty.

He was much opposed to the multiplication of devotional practices; and in his own Congregation, as it began to take shape, he reduced these to a minimum. Here the saint, as he himself has told us, had partly in mind the obvious dangers of boredom, lassitude, mechanicalness and lack of perseverance followed by reaction into the other extreme; here again we find testimony to his ever-present unwillingness to lay burdens upon poor human nature—but also, we

¹ True, were we writing upon the Congregation of the Oratory as such, there would be things to add; and what is said here must be referred to its context.

think, a contributing motive in this line of direction was that he who himself lived easily so much in the unseen, who cultivated in himself so close a personal intercourse with God and the divine-human Saviour, wished for all whom he was called upon to influence a similar freedom of spirit, a like simple dealing with God, unhampered by a network of set prayers or regimentation of interior life. And in regard to the priests of his Congregation he had also in view, no doubt, the preservation of a personal freedom from ties which was indispensable for those who were to be perpetually available for the aid of souls drifting in the surge of life.

Penultimately, however, for at the full close of this presentation of a saint concerning whom much is known and much has been written, we have a final characterisation of our own to hazard—we feel bound to deal a little more fully with the humorousness for which Philip is so famous in the realm of hagiography. For in modern times, and among well-meaning admirers, there has been a tendency to write with exaggeration and at random on this subject. Some twenty years ago there appeared an outstanding and epoch-making book, *St Philip Neri and the Roman Society of his Times*, by two French priests (not Oratorians,) which was reviewed by the eminent Henri Bremond² in an essay entitled *The Patron Saint of the Humorists*. The supreme merit of Ponnelle and Bordet lies in their historical research, their many-sidedness and their love of truth—and may many lives of saints be written on their model; but M. Bremond thinks that the joint authors minimised the peculiarity of Philip which we are considering because they themselves were lacking in the sense of humour. The older biographies, as we have seen, conventionalised the trait for the sake of edification. We cannot in this short essay discuss the opinions of all the different writers, but in some of the less eminent and even more recent than those just mentioned, we have read words which we have thought unconsidered and shallow.³ The truth of the matter we take to be, though we are far from making claim to have sounded all the depths, that Philip's gaiety and humorousness were neither merely a native endowment nor purely an adopted line of conduct, were neither wholly natural nor wholly supernatural. The two French writers have reason on their side in connecting this trait with the saint's Florentine birth; and the older biographers are not entirely beside the mark when they ascribe his jokes to humility—whether as exhibited in himself or as promoted in others. We ourselves suggest that there was native to Philip a natural gaiety of

² *Divertissements devant l'Arche*.

³ Goethe's dealing with the matter, in his celebrated characterisation of St Philip, is by no means inapt.

temperament and a vein of fantastic humour which everything that was supernatural in him approved and valued, which, while sublimating, he cultivated, and which he at times deliberately permitted to run into extravagances in order to lower men's estimate of himself or to take the nonsense out of others. Allied to, but not identical with this, was an easy cheerfulness and serenity which was natural to him, not 'produced' for the sake of edification (though to do that might in another saint be the work of heroic virtue) and still less affected; an endowment which he marvellously preserved throughout and till the very end of a life which was almost coterminous with the bewildering, terrible, tragic 16th century, no developments of which, nevertheless, were unknown to or unobserved by this inconspicuous director of souls. To use the word 'buffoonery' in connection with Philip is beside the mark as well as being scandalous; but there is also an almost libellous falsity in presenting him merely as a model for pious people who need to be rescued from a natural gloom.

And now in conclusion: A son of St Philip, writing from the home of Newman, asks to be excused if he ventures to single out as the most specific mark of his patriarch a quality which he knows not how otherwise to define than by the word *reality*, that word being used in its peculiarly English sense.⁴ The difficulty which arises from attaching this word specifically to our own saint is of course that all true saints are 'real', are genuine, simple, sincere. Yet after making this reserve we will endeavour to justify ourselves by restriction and illustration. Both Newman and Philip, each in his own way, (and in many of their ways they were so different) not only repudiated any pretence of superior sanctity as existing in themselves, but so conjoined in themselves and in their teaching the natural and the supernatural as to place themselves easily beside the average man, thus rendering high supernaturality homely and tangible, and demonstrating that the human limitation and frailty which the average man feels so keenly in himself is not inconsistent with veritable life in God. The great son of St Philip whose name we have momentarily brought in is not here our subject, but as to the saint himself we would direct attention to the wonderful, almost disconcerting, yet to our mind utterly lovable ejaculations which he himself commonly used and which he recommended to others for their own use. It is almost dangerous to detach any few of these sayings from among the rest (like the notoriously deceptive detaching of quotations from their context), but as the whole collection of them cannot at the moment be before the eyes of the readers of our paragraphs we are compelled to take this risk; and in accordance with the theme of our little essay

⁴ A combination, we should say, of realism (as generally understood) and sincerity.

we select from among them those which seem to throw the most light upon the saint's own mentality and the general trend of his direction of souls. Let us ponder seriously the radical significance of the following seven of them.

My Jesus, I would fain love thee.

My Jesus, do not trust me.

I have told thee that I do not know thee.

I seek thee and I do not find thee; come to me, my Jesus.

I have never loved thee, and I wish to love thee, my Jesus.

I would fain serve thee, my Jesus, and I do not know how.

I would fain find thee, my Jesus, and I do not know the way.

Is it possible, we are inclined to say, that a glorious saint of God should utter such words out of his own heart and as expressive of himself? Were they not intended merely for use by beginners or stumblers in the spiritual life? Yet the testimony of the saint's disciples seems to indicate conclusively that these ejaculations were first constantly in the saint's own mouth before he passed them on as good current coin to his penitents. Certainly they raise deep questions; they plunge us into mystery and fill us with awe. But also, do they not infinitely console?

Further comment on them, it seems to us, would border upon the profane, and their mere citation seems to form a fitting close to this our effort towards saying something not entirely inept upon a subject too big for adequate treatment by common man.

REVIEWS

Sous LES YEUX DE L'INCROYANT. By Jean Levie, S.J. (Desclée de Brouwer. Edition Universelle; 90 Belgian francs.)

During a recent course in apologetics for university students one student rather intelligently asked the following question. 'Why is it that these arguments and proofs seem so clear and convincing to us, and yet fail to make much impression on non-believers? Is it because we already believe and our faith causes us to look at these rational arguments in an entirely different way from non-Catholics?' Fr Levie's book is concerned with exactly the same problem. He says that thousands of unbelievers have opened our manuals only to close them even more unsatisfied and uneasy, while thousands of others have come into the Church, led by God, 'le long des chemins inconus des manuels', and have only admitted the classical proofs after having been won over in other ways. Why should the same object, the classical argument of apologetics, have such a different effect on Catholics and unbelievers?