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NEWMAN AND ST. PHILIP NERI: THE QUEST FOR SANCTITY

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MOST PEOPLE WHO FREQUENT THE WORLD OF THE UNIVERSITIES, OR WHO READ scholarly books and learned reviews have heard of Cardinal Newman. His influence and the fecundity of his thought have spread far beyond Christianity, and many of those who have read his work have no particular interest in his Catholicism. Some know him as a great nineteenth century controversialist, others as a theorist on educational questions; some are attracted by his style, others by his contribution to the idea of development and to his theories of belief. Then, of course, there are those for whom Newman is almost one of the Fathers of the Church, a great Catholic apologist, and a brilliant expositor and defender of the Faith.

It cannot, however, be said that St. Philip Neri is either widely known or greatly valued by many people today. The historian may know something of him, and those Catholics who retain an interest in and devotion to the Saints of the Calendar may have a dim recollection of this contemporary of St. Theresa of Avila and of the other Counter-Reformation Saints. Yet the Counter-Reformation is hardly in great vogue today, and neither for that matter is the cult of the Saints. What point is there, then, in trying to understand Newman, about whom so much is known, by comparing him to someone of whom so much has been forgotten?

The answer to this is, from one point of view, simple. St. Philip founded the Oratory in Rome towards the end of the sixteenth century, and Newman was an Oratorian. Consequently, we can say at least that insofar as the Oratory was important to Newman he was influenced by St. Philip, and therefore we must know something about St. Philip to understand at least some aspects of Newman's life.

Dom Placid Murray in his *Newman the Oratorian*¹ has edited Newman's Chapter addresses and occasional papers on the Oratorian vocation. This book establishes that the idea of the Oratory was central to Newman's life as a Catholic. His introduction, and even more Newman's own papers, show how carefully Newman decided on how he was to live his life as a Catholic priest, and how deep his commitment to the Oratory was. Father Stephen Dessain has said: "It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the Oratory for Newman. It was his chosen vocation; to found it in England was the first commission he received from the Catholic authorities; it was the framework for the rest of his long life, and, as has so often been the case with founders, through it some of his cruellest trials came."

What was this idea of the Oratory which so influenced Newman? It was not St. Philip's idea to found a new order or congregation in the Church. He wanted groups of secular priests living together without taking vows, priests who would live with no bond but that of charity, but who would live a life comparable to that of the best religious. As the Oratory developed each house lived its own separate existence, and was situated in a town or city with a church of its own. The work of an Oratory is prayer, preaching and the administration of the sacraments. The essential thing

about an Oratorian vocation is a call to the life of prayer. This is clear from the Constitutions or Traditions of the Oratory (what would be called the Rule in a religious order); it is clear from St. Philip's own teaching; and it is clear from the lives of all the great Oratorians. So an Oratory is supposed to be just that - a place where people pray.

The Oratory, as an institution, is a testimony to the centrality of the life of prayer, and thus a witness to the reality of God. Furthermore, a life ordered around this centrality of prayer is an object lesson that the acknowledgement of God is required for the obtaining of that happiness and satisfaction everyone is looking for.

The House and Church of the Oratory are supposed to be a center of prayer, of preaching, of study, and of learned work. Now, you cannot have a center without stability, without people who are always at the center to provide the appropriate services, and do the required work. Thus the idea of stability and of a life at home are central to Philip's conception. In 1848, Newman wrote:

The Congregation is to be the home of the Oratorian. The Italians, I believe, have no word for home - nor is it an idea which readily enters into the mind of a foreigner, at least not so readily as into the mind of an Englishman. It is remarkable then that the Oratorian Fathers should have gone out of their way to express the idea by the metaphorical word *nido* or nest, which is used by them almost technically.³

St. Philip founded the Oratory, and Newman having discovered the Oratory began to learn about St. Philip. This seems to be the historical progression. Once, however, he began to discover St. Philip he found someone, as we would say today, with whom he could identify. Philip was born at Florence in 1515 (the same year as St. Teresa of Avila). Later, near Naples, while working in an uncle's business (which he was to inherit) he had a religious experience which left him without interest in secular pursuits. He renounced his inheritance

and moved to Rome. From this time, when he was about 18, until his early 30's, he lived the life of a poor recluse, earning just enough through tutoring to meet his simple wants. During this period he spent long hours, even whole nights, in prayer in the catacombs where the early Christians had buried their dead, and where they could safely celebrate the mysteries of their religion. Those dark and silent galleries were for Philip the living and speaking image of the ages of persecution. Cardinal Newman, in a litany he wrote, called Philip "Man of primitive times," and in many respects he does seem more a man of earlier times than one whose lot was cast amid the splendors and conflicts of the sixteenth century.

Out of those dark and mysterious catacombs, out of the damp and dangerous corridors under the earth, a light began to shine for Philip that took possession of him in a way that left physiological as well as psychological after-effects. From out of the ruins of a persecuted and devastated Church a light began to shine not only for Philip, but in Philip. When he was 28, in 1544, on the Eve of Pentecost, while he was praying in the Catacomb of S. Sebastiano, he had a direct experience of the Holy Spirit in the form of a globe of fire that lodged in his heart.

Whatever we are to make of this mysterious happening (all the early biographers do not hesitate to call it a miracle), there can be no doubting the effects in Philip's own life. He became, in the years that followed, the restorer and regenerator of the Church in Rome. It has been said that the work of St. Ignatius and the Society of Jesus in turning back the Reformation all over Europe would have been of no avail without the work of Philip at the center of the Church.

At 35, on his confessor's advice, he became a priest. His Oratory grew out of the confessional where he spent long hours each day. He began to have spiritual conferences, and lectures on the lives of the Saints. A room or oratory was built for these gatherings, and the priests who helped came to be called Oratorians.

Newman tells us that Philip came not to argue,



St. Philip Neri

not to berate, not to condemn: “He put from him monastic rule and authoritative speech, as David refused the armour of his King - he would be an ordinary individual priest as others, and his weapons would be but unaffected humility and unpretending love.”⁴ But, whatever St. Philip was, he was anything but ordinary. Pope John Paul II in our own day has written very movingly about St. Philip and his work. The Pope said on St. Philip’s feast day in 1979:

St. Philip was a man of culture and charity, of study and organization, of teaching and prayer. For Rome he was a tireless confessor, a brilliant educator and a friend of all, and particularly he was an expert counsellor and a delicate director of consciences. Popes and cardinals, bishops and priests, princes and politicians, religious and artists, had recourse to him: illustrious persons such as the historian Cesare Baronio and the famous composer Palestrina, St. Charles Borromeo and St. Ignatius of Loyola, and Cardinal Federigo Borromeo confided in his heart, the heart of a father and friend.⁵

But Philip had not begun with these people; he had begun with the poor and the lonely and the outcast, and so the Holy Father continues:

That poor little room in his apartment was above all the goal of an immense multitude of humble persons of the people, the suffering, the disinherited, the outcasts of society, young people, children who looked to him to receive advice, forgiveness, peace, encouragement, material and spiritual aid.⁶

Newman, having come to know Philip as the founder of the Oratory, came to love him for himself. Yet on the face of it the reason for the attraction is not obvious. Dwight Culler has argued that Newman was able to see in St. Philip the incarnation of his educational ideals, and I think he is correct.⁷ Philip’s sanctity was built on, or into, the humanism of renaissance Italy. St. Philip, if he had not become a saint, might well have been a courtier or a philosopher instead. In his youth, says Father Bacci, one of his first biographers, he studied philosophy and theology until “he was reckoned one of the most distinguished scholars in the schools of Rome.” But, when “he had made sufficient advancement in learning, not for his own use only, but also for the edification of others ... he laid his studies aside and applied himself wholly to that science which is found in the crucifix.”⁸

Philip lived, as Newman himself said of him, when “pride mounted high, and the sense held rule ... when medieval winter was receding, and the summer sun of civilization was bringing into leaf and flower a thousand forms of luxurious enjoyment; when a new world of thought and beauty had opened before the human mind, in the discoveries of classic literature and art.”⁹ Philip saw the dangers this presented but he also saw that no matter what might be the methods of others in meeting them, his own method must be that of mildness and moderation, of patience and a sweet, attractive charm. “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 sanctify what God had made very good and man had spoiled.”¹⁰



Professor Culler has, I think, shown us the important truth that in St. Philip, Newman saw the realization of his educational ideal. But, there remains the question of the nature of the sanctity into which the learning was to be incorporated. Dean Church, Newman’s Anglican friend, has given us a clue to the answer of this question in the following passage about Newman’s conversion:

At least the Roman Church had not only preserved, but maintained at full strength through the centuries to our day two things of which the New Testament was full, and which was characteristic of it - devotion and self-sacrifice ... Devotion and sacrifice, prayer and self-denying charity, in one word sanctity, are at once on the surface of the New Testament and interwoven with its substance ... He turned to where, in spite of every other disadvantage, he thought he found them. In S. Filippo Neri he could find a link between the New Testament and progressive civilization.¹¹

“Devotion and self-sacrifice, prayer and self-denying charity, in one word sanctity. ...” Newman saw these ideals made real in the life of St. Philip Neri, and St. Philip became his model and inspiration of sanctity. This devotion to St. Philip, on Newman’s part, was no merely formal acknowledgement of holiness, no mere conventional recognition of the sanctity of the founder of the Institute to which he belongs. “As Christians, he writes, we have given ourselves to Christ, to make this more sure

and definite, we have, as Oratorians, given ourselves to St. Philip - we are not our own property, but his, and we must please, not ourselves, but him.”¹² In addition to this devotion to St. Philip as the Founder of the Oratory, there was also a growing into a more personal relationship with, and a very real sense of dependence on, the saint:

As years go on, I have less sensible devotion and inward life ... I more and more wonder at old saints. St. Aloysius or St. Francis Xavier or St. Carlo, are nothing to St. Philip. O Philip gain me some little portion of thy fervour. I live more and more in the past, and in hopes that the past may revive in the future.¹³

It is thus clear that Newman found in the Oratory not only a way in which to lead his priestly life, but also, in St. Philip, he found a model in which he could see the realization of his educational and spiritual ideals.

The next obvious step would be to discuss the success of Newman’s efforts to follow St. Philip’s example in his own quest for sanctity; but before trying to do this we have to make a fairly extensive detour. This detour is caused by a question we cannot ignore: what, it will be asked, is the value or relevance of talking about sanctity in the present juncture of the Church’s history? The whole exercise would seem, from many people’s point of view, just pointless. The very notion of sanctity, it will be said, understood as a striving after the acquisition of personal virtue is itself under examination and will probably be extensively revised. It just doesn’t matter whether or not St. Philip influenced Newman. Why waste time then in drawing historical connections between an obscure sixteenth century Italian and a nineteenth century Englishman? Is not the whole exercise a trip down a blind alley?

II

The person who says we are wasting our time in trying to talk about Newman’s sanctity judged in relation to his model of St. Philip would probably tell us that no one was interested any more in this kind of question. He might well point to the fact that twenty years ago, if you walked into a Catholic bookshop, you would find a section devoted to the lives of the saints. Today those same shelves, assuming the Catholic bookshop still exists, are likely to be filled either with books on sociology of religion, or on Zen, or on various personages from

the Third World. The example of the bookshop is only an outward sign of the truth that the cult of the saints (including that of our Lady) has been removed from the consciousness of the ordinary Catholic. A whole generation of Catholics has grown up who have never even heard of most of the saints of the calendar.

This situation cannot be blamed on anything the Second Vatican Council taught. In clear and unambiguous language the Council tells us that the saints provide us with examples of Christian living at its highest, and that these saints are to be prayed to for the benefits we need:

It is most fitting that we love those friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ who are also our brothers and outstanding benefactors, and that we give due thanks to God for them, humbly invoking them, and having recourse to their prayers, their aid and help in obtaining from God through his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, our only Redeemer and Saviour, the benefits we need.¹⁴

If it is “most fitting” that we should love the saints and pray to them, and if it is true that we do not love them and pray to them, it might be instructive to find out why this is so. The attempt to understand is in itself a responsibility of reason and of faith. It is true that to understand is not the same thing as to condone, but there is no doubt that trying to understand sharpens the statement of our own case, and improves our own understanding of what we believe to be true.

There are, I suggest, three aspects of contemporary Catholic thought that lead to a de facto neglect of the saints. There is first of all, an anti-historical tendency that results in an undervaluing of what is individual and unique in experience. Secondly, there is the present day tendency to equate mental health and sanctity. This results in the acceptance of psychological rather than ascetical standards in the direction of life. Finally, there is the ethical or political current which holds that the traditional Christian virtues life, and at worst are the reinforcersl of an unjust real problems social system.

a) *The anti-historical tendency.* There are many periods in the history of the Church, and many individuals in the past that do not seem to mean very much to us. We can take as an example the life and times of St. Philip himself. The men and women of the sixteenth century understood St. Philip, but it is clear that we do not relate

to him as did his contemporaries. After all, does not his world seem very far away - not only in time (getting on for 400 years) but also, if you will forgive the word, in relevance? What have those tremendous Reformation and Counter-Reformation controversies about grace and free-will, will, justification and merit, the number of the sacraments, got do with us? That great baroque world of splendid music, of brava figura, of pomp and circumstance seems further away from us than the world of the Gospels, or even of ancient Greece. A world that could get so excited about the correct definition of external imputation - or otherwise - of justification is not a world in which most of us feel much at home. This has nothing to do with the question of the intrinsic value of the discussion; I am merely trying to say what I think is true, that few of us have much immediate empathy with the Rome of the Counter-Reformation.

The contemporary Catholic method of dealing with this apparent lack of relevance is to try to strip away what are variously called historical accidents, or perhaps accretions. What is historical, positive, contingent, factual is felt to be inconsistent with a pure and rational religion. Now, for better or worse, Catholicism is not like that. Newman said that to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant. He meant that once you begin to see the Church as a living historical entity, then the Protestant view of a trans-temporal, disincarnate Christianity would have to be given up. If we could extend Newman's thought we could say that to forget about history is to cease to be a Catholic. It is in history that we see the merging together of the divine and the human, it is in history we see the prolongation of the particularity of the incarnation and the cross. It is the sheer stubborn particularity of what actually happened that sets barriers to our passion for generalizing, for removing differences, for reducing events to general laws.

The saints, after Christ himself, present the ultimate barrier to this desire of the understanding to codify, to reduce to a system, to reject the given in the interests of theory, to categorize the human personality into neatly packaged entities. To insist on history and its importance is to insist that fact comes before idea, reality before thought, existence before essence. It was in history that our religion was conceived and was born. It was in a person and from a person that it had its

origin, that it took its life, that it has its meaning. "Since the world did not know God through wisdom," says St. Paul, "it has known about him through the folly of the cross, the folly of what we preach."¹⁵ St. Philip, and each of the rest of the saints, lived Christ Jesus and him crucified in his own particular, existential and historical way. Each of the saints is a living reminder of the uniqueness of the incarnation, and of the folly of the cross. Each of the saints becomes in his own way that stone of offence that was Jesus Christ, that stone against which men stumble and fall when they try to ignore it. When we ignore the saints we are not coming closer to Christ. On the contrary, we are showing we have yet to grasp the reality and significance of his Church as the continuation in time of the glory of the incarnation.

b) Mental health and sanctity. Traditionally, a saint has been viewed as someone who sought perfection, and to a large measure succeeded. Usually he is someone who lived the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience in an heroic way. Even when it was not the case of a vowed life, the saint used to be looked on as someone who lived a life in which mortification and penance played a large part. The ascetical life was undertaken in order to achieve perfection. The conceiving of the Christian life in terms of perfection goes back to our Lord's words recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."¹⁶

The Second Vatican Council, once again, is quite clear that everyone in the Church is called to holiness. "All the faithful," says the Council in unambiguous language, "are invited and obliged to holiness and the perfection of their state of life."¹⁷ To talk about perfection or holiness is to introduce the idea of a standard, a norm or an ideal into our awareness. And, once we introduce the idea of a standard, norm or ideal into our existence there is at least the possibility that we may fail to meet it in one way or the other. Perfection or holiness can then become, so it is argued, a block or a burden to the flowering of our human nature. The very idea of saying no to ourselves in the interests of something higher is seen as a sure way of producing inhibitions, complexes, double-think, hypocrisy, self-deception and breakdowns.


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It is a strange fact that many people in the Church today argue against striving for sanctity in the same way Luther did. It is a strange fact not so much because Protestant thinking has affected Catholic thought, but because Luther's argument against the ascetical life was based on theological considerations. He thought that mysticism and the spiritual life were founded on Pelagian or semi-Pelagian presuppositions. Nonetheless what he said has a curiously modern ring to it. In his Commentary on the Galatians he wrote that "The saints of the Papists are like to the Stoics, who imagined such wise men as in the world were never yet to be found. And by this foolish and wicked persuasion ... the schoolmen brought both themselves and others without number in (horrible) desperation."¹⁸

I think it would be wrong to deny that the quest for holiness has its dangers, and that it can lead to abuses. Yet, there is a tendency nowadays to look on the failures rather than the successes. Perfection can be viewed as an abstract word to be imposed on a human personality with little respect for the differences and values which distinguish one person from another. The result can then be a group of people who are recognizably the same. Yet these people, often enough, possess little of the interest or individuality which they once had before they began their training. Thus it was said (without irony) of the members of a great religious order in the Church that "they meet without affection and part without regret." The self-conscious striving after holiness has its dangers. People today have a sense that they do not want to end up as people who, because they have tried to follow our Lord in a serious way, are less than human; they do not want to be turned into individuals who are cold, forbidding and austere with very little that is lovable about them in any ordinary sense of the word.

St. Philip and St. Teresa of Avila seem to have been conscious of this danger. St. Philip took great pains not to edify people in any conventional sense of that word, and St. Teresa once shocked a pious visitor who was introduced into her presence, and found her eating a partridge. To his protests that this was hardly what was expected of a saint she is supposed to have fixed him with an amused glance as she replied: "There is a time for partridge and a time for penance." Saints we believe, and believe correctly, should not be less than human.

One does not want to be simplistic, but surely we have to remind ourselves of the old Latin *tag abusus non*

tollit usum. The effort to love and serve God may have at times produced crackpots or zombies, but it also produced the saints. Because something can be badly used it does not follow it should not be used at all. Similarly, it does not follow, because the search for perfection has traditionally involved mortification and penance, that these should be given up for fear they produce a strain on the psyche of modern man that he is unable to bear, or turn him into a stereotyped amalgam of a nexus of abstract virtues.

No one, either as an Anglican or as a Catholic, was firmer on the necessity of the ascetical side of Christianity than was Newman. In this he showed himself as a true son of St. Philip. Newman exposed, it is true, the hypocrisy of apparently religious people, and had very hard things to say about self-deceit and secret faults, but nonetheless "it was he who popularized in English the word detachment."¹⁹ And detachment for Newman means the self-denial that is necessary to live a Christian life. A great saint, St. Philip Neri, said that if he had a dozen really detached men, he should be able to convert the world. To be detached is to be loosened from every tie which binds the soul to the earth, to be dependent on nothing sublunary, to lean on nothing temporal; it is simply to care simply nothing for what other men choose to say or think of us, or do to us; to go about our own work, because it is our duty, as soldiers go to battle, without a care for the consequences; to account credit, honour, name, easy circumstances, comfort, human affections, just nothing at all, when any religious obligation involves the sacrifice of them.²⁰

The psychological argument that striving for perfection is inhibiting and repressive only gains cogency by concentrating on the failures. To suggest that St. Philip, for example, was inhibited or blocked by the effort to strive after what he knew he did not as yet possess is to deny the plain evidence of history. The same can surely be said of most of the great saints. There are some who appear to manifest one set of virtues rather than others, but to say of St. John of the Cross, or St. Teresa of Avila, precisely saints who insisted most on mortification, that it destroyed their humanity is to prefer theory to fact.

c) *The Ethical-Political argument against the spiritual life*. But the science of the saints has suffered another attack in recent years, an attack which is in some ways the completion of the one just mentioned. Rather than arguing that the traditional doctrine of sanctity is psy-

chologically harmful, the modern critics, many of them Catholics, maintain in effect that it is either useless, or socially harmful. Mortification, patience and the rest are associated in the minds of many today with an outmoded, a pietistic and inward-looking vision of Christianity; a Christianity that is ill-equipped to deal with the great issues of war and peace, of nuclear disarmament, and of starvation on a worldwide scale. Furthermore, so we often hear nowadays, it is precisely the Church's concentration on virtues such as patience, endurance and long-suffering which has produced generations of Catholics who are more interested in themselves than in the world in which they live; Catholics who are timid and irresolute when faced with the challenges of modern life; Catholics who have used their faith to band together so as to hide and defend themselves against the harsh demands of the real world.

Nietzsche wrote that "there is nothing very odd about lambs disliking large birds of prey, but there is no reason to hold it against large birds of prey that they carry off lambs."²¹ Morality, and Christian morality in particular, Nietzsche thought, was the product of people who are lamb-like in their weakness and resent the strong. "So the oppressed, the down-trodden and the violated whisper among themselves with the wily vengefulness of the impotent"²² and take refuge in a morality that is founded on resentment. Such a morality teaches the importance of patience, of forgiveness and respect for others. But it teaches these virtues not because they will help us in our striving for the good, but because they will hobble the strong and make the world safer for the weak.



This kind of thinking is much older than Nietzsche. It finds an early and articulate expression in Plato's portrait of Thrasymachus in the Republic. Since at least that time it has been a constant theme among those who wonder about the nature and destiny of man. But it is only one theme and until fairly recently it would have been thought to be a theme that runs counter to the Christian view of life. Nowadays, however, the traditional virtues are often looked upon, especially by those concerned with peace and justice, as part and parcel of an amalgam of oppressive social and political concepts. Patience, long-suffering, modesty, are at best irrelevant

to the real problems of life, and at worst the reinforcers of an unjust social system. It is clear that with this view of existence there is little room for paying attention to people whose whole lives have been devoted to the cultivation of these very virtues; whose whole lives have been dominated by what would nowadays be called an "otherworldly morality."

Once again, we cannot deal with all the implications of this sort of criticism. Its roots seem to me to lie in a view of life incompatible with historic Catholicism. Our faith tells us that "we are wanderers and sojourners here, as all our fathers were" and that "here we have no abiding city."²³ It may, for a time, be more fun without the four last things, but what is Catholicism without death, judgment, heaven and hell? Whatever it is, it is not Catholicism. I think we have to admit that sometimes faith has been used as a crutch. I would add, first of all, that this proves nothing, because everyone in fact needs crutches. Surely we have had enough of the *Urbemensch* in our time, whether he comes in Nietzsche's garb, or with the rags of a theology of evolution. Secondly, though, it is the saints, and those who have led saint-like lives, who have been most effective as human beings. The modern age confuses gentleness with weakness and ineffectiveness. But, when the chips are down and reality has to be faced, it is those who have tried to put God first who do not succumb. I have recently been reading Edith Stein's book on St. John of the Cross,²⁴ a book she left incomplete on her desk when the S.S. came to the Carmel in Echt to take her away forever. Evelyn Waugh has written a beautiful passage on this holy Carmelite which still has a lesson for us:

Her spirit shines out, very clear and lonely; a brilliant intelligence; a pure, disciplined will; a single motive power the grace of God. The circumstances of her death touch us for they lie at the heart of contemporary disaster. The aimless impersonal wickedness which could drag a victim from the holy silence of Carmel and drive her, stripped and crowded, to the gas chamber and the furnace, still lurks in the darkness. But Edith's death is perhaps an irrelevant horror. Her life was completed in Carmel. She did not sit waiting on God. She went out alone and by the God-given light of her intelligence and strength of purpose, she found him.²⁵

That is the sort of thing sanctity is about, a daily dying to self in order to find the Lord within; a daily dy-

ing to self so that in St. Paul's words, words that St. Philip made his own: "I became all things to all men, that by all means I might save some."²⁶ Our age may have little time for sanctity, but that is a judgment on our age, not on the saints.

III

Let us grant, then, that the quest for sanctity is still relevant in the last part of the twentieth century. Let us grant - as we surely must - that it was relevant to John Henry Newman in the nineteenth. He believed that, as the old catechism formulated it, to know, love and serve God was the one thing needful. Let us grant with the Second Vatican Council that we can learn from the saints in our own quest for sanctity. If we work within this framework we will see that there are many modes in which the saints can inspire us. Chesterton said, (before the widespread neglect of the saints appeared) that each age spontaneously gravitates to the saints who exhibit the qualities the age needs. I would be prepared to argue at great length that St. Philip Neri is such a saint for our own age, and that we would do well, as Pope John Paul has suggested, to take him as our guide and model. It is clear in his own quest for sanctity, John Henry Newman did take St. Philip as such a guide. How far did he succeed in following him?

Before I say any more, let me emphasize that I think Newman to be a man cast in an heroic mold. Morally, intellectually and spiritually he outshines many of those closest to him. Whether he is canonized or not his example of patient suffering and loyalty to the Church will remain an inspiration and example. But was he a saint?

I think it is clear enough, from what I have said so far, that Newman's search for holiness was undertaken under the inspiration of St. Philip, and within the framework of an Oratorian vocation. The consideration of his sanctity will have to include his fidelity to this vocation as one of its aspects. Furthermore, if it is true that the Oratorian vocation lies close to the heart of his search for sanctity, then it would seem to me that he will have to be shown to have been a superlatively good Oratorian, a superlatively good Oratorian who succeeded in practicing at least some of St. Philip's virtues in an heroic degree. It is here my own difficulties begin.

Dom Placid Murray in *Newman the Oratorian* says

that "though in a sense Newman shared the Oratorian venture *in solidum* with his companions, yet he revealed himself in the Santa Croce papers as the thinker, the leader gifted with a far-seeing sense of strategy...none of his companions could really be called a co-founder with him of the English Oratory."²⁷ Part of Newman's work as founder was a revision of the Rule of the Oratory for England..."I considered," he wrote later, "that the lapse of three hundred years, changing external circumstances, made changes necessary in the religious instruments which are their correlatives..."²⁸ One of these changes was anything but minor and concerned a paragraph which stated that Oratorians were not supposed to hear the confessions of nuns (*moniales*), nor were they to have the care of seminaries or universities. Newman added to this: *sine gravi necessitate*." In other words, given a grave necessity, the Fathers, because of changing times, could engage in work the original Rule had forbidden.

In the spring of 1851, Cardinal Cullen opened negotiations with Newman with a view to securing his services as the head of the new Catholic University in Ireland. Before the summer was out he had agreed to accept the position, and to give several years of his life to launching the new project. He asked that permission be secured from Pius IX to be absent from his Oratory in Birmingham (which had just been installed in its new house in Edgbaston) for such periods each year as the task required. Newman remained as Rector until November 1858, although his tenure of the office during the last year was purely nominal.

The reasons for his resignation from the University, the success or failure of the Irish project, are not germane here. In writing of Newman's leaving Dublin, Father Dessain says: "When Newman grasped that (the University) was to be a purely Irish affair, and still more when he found that his presence in his own Oratory, *where his first duty lay*, was urgently required, he returned to Birmingham..."³⁰

I want now to ask, if Newman's first duty lay in Birmingham, then why did he ever leave it? It is clear from the example of St. Philip and of the Oratorian tradition itself that what the Benedictines call *stabilitas* is an essential part of the Oratorian way of life. This stability was one of the major means of inculcating an apostolic spirit of charity into the Institute and each of its members, for it is mutual charity - rather than vows, as for Religious - that binds the Oratory together. Newman

himself was, of course, aware of this, as can be seen in everything he wrote about the Oratory being based on the idea of a family. In a Chapter Address, written ironically enough in Dublin, he wrote the following:

(The vocation of an Oratorian) is to a *fixed place*, and I may say, to a particular body. Regulars may consider themselves wanderers upon the face of the earth; such is not a Father of the Oratory. In spite of that detachment, which St. Philip esteemed so highly, he bids us, in his rule, “bind ourselves more closely to each other in love,” by “daily intercourse,” and “daily knowledge of one another’s ways,” and even by the very look of “familiar countenances.” Accordingly, each house is said to be a “family,” and the Superior is “the Father.”²³¹

In going to Dublin Newman secured the proper legal permissions. The very fact he asked for these permissions, however, prompts the question as to how high up the list of his priorities was the “daily intercourse,” “the daily knowledge of each other’s ways” and the “familiar countenances.” If Newman’s sanctity is to be determined in relation to his Oratorianism, then his fidelity to the Institute, when other interests were at stake, will have to be considered.

This leads naturally to the next question. One of the reasons that Newman’s presence was required at home was the existence of a monumental and singularly nasty battle between Newman’s Oratory at Birmingham and the one he had set up in London under Father Faber’s leadership. The origins of the row with the London Oratory are to be found, strangely enough, in the very paragraph of the Rule to which we have already referred, that same paragraph to which Newman had had appended the words *sine gravi necessitate*. The Fathers, this paragraph says, are not to hear the confessions of nuns. The London Fathers were scarcely in their new home when Cardinal Wiseman (their own Archbishop) wrote a long letter to them asking them to do just that. Wiseman pointed out the good the Fathers could do, and Faber felt he could not honestly refuse this request. The Fathers differed as to whether it was lawful or not to accede to the Cardinal’s wishes. It could even be argued that if Newman’s clause allowed him to be in Dublin, then perhaps the same thing applied to them. In any case, they referred the matter to Propaganda in Rome. They asked first for an interpretation of the Rule on this matter or for permission, if necessary, to relax it.

The London Fathers maintained that Newman knew of their application. Newman later said he thought the application was only to the Roman house of the Oratory which, as such, would have no legal force. London, because of Wiseman’s request and not because of their own preferences, applied for the permission. Birmingham did not want the permission, and was afraid it would apply to them.

The row developed to extraordinary proportions. I think the fairest summary is to be found in Ronald Chapman’s book, *Father Faber*,³² and there is much to be said legally on both sides. The question, however, cannot be judged by legal criteria alone. The promoters of Newman’s Cause will have to show that Newman’s violence, and that seems to me the only word for it, a violence that caught the London Fathers completely off guard, was prompted by a desire to safeguard the integrity of the Oratory. Charity does contain an aspect of justice, and some saints have been called to show the justice of charity, and others its mercy. But, as Cardinal Capecelatro, the nineteenth-century Oratorian biographer of St. Philip, says: “While charity is ever in substance the same, it sometimes assumes a form so gentle, and tender and loving, that it seems almost a new virtue, or rather a special outward and visible perfection of the virtue.”³³ Newman certainly did not exhibit this merciful side of charity in the present instance. This does not mean he was never merciful; but when we consider his long life of controversy, a life in which he gave as good as he got, we will have to conclude, if he exercised charity in an heroic degree, then he was called by God to show the justice of charity and not its mercy. Academic controversy is not noted for its kindness, and to be on the wrong side of Newman over a matter of principle was to receive very harsh treatment indeed. Hampden, Kingsley and Father Faber could all attest to this.

Father Faber and the London Fathers may have been everything the defenders of Newman say they were (although I have to say I do not think they have been fairly treated in recent years), but it is about time someone made the point that the denigration of Father Faber and his Oratory does not prove the sanctity of Newman. All it shows is that Newman was presented with a difficult situation, with a trial. With the opening of the Cause, though, the question is no longer the beastliness or otherwise of Father Faber, but the quality of Newman’s response to the difficulty; did Newman handle the matter heroically, or just well? Did he handle it badly or

unjustly?

The row got out of hand, at least in part, because Newman was in Dublin. At one point, it seems clear the London Fathers felt Newman was too busy to bother. In any case, Newman was not living as an Oratorian. It is clear he realized this,³⁴ no doubt he agonized about it, but the fact remains that he judged that the chance of founding a University took precedence over his Oratorian commitments. I am convinced that Newman's loss of moral authority over the London Fathers is directly connected with the Dublin venture. It might even be suggested that Newman had a bad conscience about being in Dublin; certainly, he was uneasy about it. People who are uneasy about their own line of conduct are wont to act badly when others step out of line.

Furthermore, Newman did not like Faber, and never had. It is also clear that Faber in turn both idolized and resented Newman. Faber must have been a pain in the neck for Newman. Once again, though, how did Newman handle it? He didn't handle it very badly; but then again, he didn't handle it very well either. In his autobiographical writings he speaks of 35 he thousand whisperings against me at the London Oratory. I have argued in the past that if the justification for Newman's letters and attitude towards the London House was the ultimate good of the Oratory, then he ought to have defended his own Oratory and its reputation. To this I have been told that Newman was aware of the good the London Oratory was doing and was therefore unwilling to attack it in public. If this is true, then his silence was indeed heroic, although it meant the slowing down of his own Oratory and resulted in no new Oratories being founded. There is a factor in all this that has not been worked out or properly identified. Chapman may be correct when he says that there was an element of jealousy on Newman's part at the success of the London House. In any case, there are times when Newman's attitude seems more like a good old-fashioned case of the sulks than anything resembling the heroic practice of charity - even charity understood as justice.

St. Philip was insistent that his sons should not accept ecclesiastical honors and dignities, and forbade them to accept any such promotion unless ordered by the Pope himself. *The Excellences of the Oratory* is a book written before 1749 which sums up about WII ten when dthe years of and Oratory was till a well known practice. It was and influential Institute in the Church and before

its rapid decline in the nineteenth century. In it the author has the following to say about the avoidance of ecclesiastical dignities:

I consider it a great happiness and a signal prerogative of the priests of the Oratory that they are far removed from (the) great danger which ecclesiastical dignities bring with them, being unable to aspire after them, or to receive them, except in obedience to the sovereign Pontiff, both in order to remain deeply rooted in humility, and to imitate our holy Father St. Philip, who with such constancy always refused the dignities, canonries, mitres, and even the Roman Purple, so often offered to him.³⁶

Newman knew this book well, and there are echoes of it in the *Idea of a University*. As Rector of the University, so the evidence shows, he was offered a titular-bishopric. The matter was public and he was given presents suitable to his new state (including two mitres from the London Oratory), and was ceremonially treated as a bishop-elect in the Cathedral in Birmingham. But the mandate for the consecration never came, and Newman had no use for his new finery. It seems that Cardinal Cullen was of the opinion that one mitre in any diocese was enough. The whole episode does little credit to anyone, and is often adduced as another example of Newman's heroic resignation, as well as of the moral turpitude of anyone who crossed him. No one has asked, though, so far as I know, why Newman agreed to the suggestion in the first place. St. Philip would not have been pleased. Of course, Newman did not want the mitre for ambitious reasons, but because it would give him clout as Rector of the University. Yet if the Rectorship led to the Episcopacy this is only one more proof he should never have gone to Dublin in the first place.

No doubt it will be said that these are counsels of perfection and so imply that I am being unrealistic, and too harsh on Newman. But is not this precisely the point? We are supposed to be talking about the sanctity of an Oratorian, and I am suggesting that we have to ask if he acted as a saintly Oratorian should. The Blessed Sebastian Valfre of the Turin Oratory, much to the displeasure of all concerned, refused the Archbishopric of his native city, and what is more, made his refusal stick. There have been lots of *Oratorian* Bishops and Cardinals, but there is only one beatus among them. The Blessed Juvenal Ancina spent three years trying to run away, at times quite literally, to escape his promotion. He had known St. Philip, and knew what he would have said. Did Newman

even think of saying no? Nothing in his autobiographical writings suggests he did so.

Finally, there is the question of Newman's temperament. We are told that St. Philip was never troubled with morbid melancholy, but was bright with a serene and sunny gladness. Yet, says Cardinal Capecepolo, his life was not one that would naturally tend to make him cheerful. "He lived in evil days; he was always amidst the throng of the evil and the sick, his own illnesses were many and severe; he had his full measure of persecution and wrong. Yet, Philip saw God always and in everything, and hence flowed his abiding peace of soul, and the cheerfulness which nothing earthly could dim.

Once again it is not clear that Newman managed to be cheerful in anything like St. Philip's style. The testimony is at best conflicting. It seems to be the case that Newman was cursed with shyness that often made him tongue-tied and aloof. With those he liked and trusted he was evidently irresistible and spread good cheer to those around him. But even in his own house he was sometimes reduced to writing notes to people in order to say he was sorry he couldn't find anything to say to them at recreation. Furthermore, there are accounts which suggest that a strain of heaviness or gloom was an element in his makeup.

The famous judgment of Baron von Hügel is well

known and is usually met with an attack on the Baron. Nonetheless, attacks are not going to change the fact that the Baron could praise Newman, but found him depressing; and in this he was not alone. "I used to wonder," he wrote in 1921, "in my intercourse with John Henry Newman, how one so good, and who had made so many sacrifices to God, could be so depressing." This judgment was not prompted by an inability to appreciate the Cardinal:

A temperament ... like Cardinal Newman's who ... has been little understood, much persecuted, has nearly always been in the right and with a mind a dozen times deeper and broader than his opponents: but who also had a most impressionable temperament, easily affected by the pricks which at the end even flies seemed to give him: a temperament to which he more or less succumbed.³⁸

In another place the Baron spoke of "this sad and sombre character" in reference to Newman.

Newman was what Hegel called a world historical figure. Intellectually, and in so many other ways, he dwarfs all those around him. But was he a saint? I do not know, and await the Church's judgment. His love and devotion to St. Philip are beyond question, but Newman's sanctity, if indeed it was vouchsafed to him, was in his own unique mold. Perhaps, that is the way it was.



NOTES

1Placid Murray, O.S.B., *Newman the Oratorian, His Unpublished Oratory Papers* (Dublin, 1969).

2C. S. Dessain (of the Birmingham Oratory), *John Henry Newman* (London and Edinburgh, 1966), p. 93.

3Murray, op. cit., p. 192.

4J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, "Duties of the Church Towards Knowledge" (Image Books, 1959), p. 239.

5Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Chiesa Nacova May 26, 1979, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition, June 8, 1979.

6Ibid.

7A. Dwight Culler, *The Imperial Intellect, A Study of Newman's Educational Ideal*, "The Religion of Philosophy" (New Haven, 1955), pp. 242-3.

8Pietro Giacomo Bacci (of the Roman Oratory), *The Life of St. Philip Neri*, first published in 1622. English translation and Edition by F. I. Antrobus (of the London Oratory) (London, 1902), p. 19. (Cited by Culler, op. cit., p. 242.)

9*The Idea of a University*, p. 238.

10Ibid., p. 239.

11R W Church, *Occasional Papers*, II (London, 1897), pp. 470-4. Cited in Dessain, op. cit., p. 86.

12Newman's Oratory Papers No. 26, in Murray, op. cit., pp. 347-8.

13J. H. Newman, *Autobiographical Writings* (London and New York, 1955), p. 249. Quoted in Murray, op. cit., p.

14*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Flannery (New York, 1975). Constitution on the Church, No. 50.

151 Cor. 1:21.

16Matthew 5:48.

17*The Documents of Vatican II*, The Church, No. 42.

18Cited in John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London, 1970), p. 123.

19C. S. Dessain, *Newman's Spiritual Themes* (Dublin, 1977), p. 127.

20J. H. Newman, *Historical Sketches*, Vol. III (London, 1903), p. 130.

21*The Genealogy of Morals*, Sec. XIII.

22Ibid.

23Cf. Lev. 25:23; Heb. 13:14.

24Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, tr. H. Graef (London, 1960).

25Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Order*, "Edith Stein" (London, 1977), p. 191.

261 Cor. 9:22.

27Murray, op. cit., p. 93.

28Newman's Oratory Paper No. 25, in Murray, op. cit., p. 339.

29*Instituta Congregationis Anglicae Oratorii S. Philippi Nerii*, Romae 1847. Decretum LXX.

30C. S. Dessain, *John Henry Newman*, p. 107.

31Newman's Oratory Papers No. 25, in Murray, op. cit., p. 329.

32 Ronald Chapman, *Father Faber*, "Troubles in the Oratory," Ch. X (Westminster: Maryland, 1961).

33Alfonso, Cardinal Capeceletro, *The Life of St. Philip Neri*, "St. Philip's School of Christian Perfection," New Edition, Ch. XI (London, 1926), p. 231.

34 "There can be no doubt at all, for instance, that my own present position in Dublin is distinctly incompatible with the Oratory, nor should I have taken it if left to myself. At first I wished to be a mere Prefect of Studies, and at the very time of my appointment at Rome I was writing to Dr. Cullen to see that I was made nothing more than Pro-Rector. And I felt, as you know, that I could not be absent from the Oratory at all, after my appointment without an express permission from the Holy See to that effect. What I have observed in my own case I wish to apply to others. For this reason I consider that any occupation which carries a Father often or for a considerable time from the Oratory, is inconsistent with its spirit ..." *Oratory Papers* 24 and 25. Murray, op. cit., p. 306.

35 "First in 1853, came my mistake of asking for Dalgairns from the London House; then my going to Ireland, in order to impinge great Cullen, while Dalgairns intrigued at home in my absence, then the plot of him, Faber, etc. - and my going to Rome - and the treatment I met at Propaganda. Then the thousand whisperings against me at the London Oratory, which have succeeded in prejudicing the Catholic body to a great extent against me." *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 256.

36*The Excellences of the Congregation of the Oratory*, translated from the Italian and abridged by F. I. Antrobus (London, 1881), p. 54.

37Alfonso, *Cardinal Capeceletro*, op. cit., p. 247.

38Michael de la Bedoyere, *The Life of Baron von Hugel* (London, 1951), p. 32.