



The Holy See

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II ON THE OCCASION OF THE IV CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF ST PHILIP NERI

Reverend Father, On the occasion of the fourth centenary of the *dies natalis* of St Philip Neri, Florentine by birth and Roman by adoption, I am pleased to address you and all the members of the Confederation of the Oratory, to recall its founder's example of holiness and to strengthen in each one the commitment of faith, active charity and enduring in hope (cf. 1 Thes 1:3).¹ The loving figure of the "*saint of joy*" even today still maintains intact that irresistible charm that he exercised on all those who drew near him to learn to know and experience the authentic sources of Christian joy. Leafing through the biography of St Philip, in fact, one is surprised and fascinated by the *cheerful and relaxed method he used to educate*, supporting each person with fraternal generosity and patience. As is well known, the saint used to put his teaching into *short and wise maxims*: "Be good, if you can"; "Scruples and melancholy, stay away from my house"; "Be simple and humble"; "He who does not pray is a speechless animal"; and, bringing his hand to his forehead, "Holiness is three fingers deep". Behind the cleverness of these and many other "sayings", we are aware of the acute and realistic knowledge he had acquired of human nature and the dynamics of grace. He translated *the experience of his long life and the wisdom of a heart inhabited by the Holy Spirit* into these immediate, terse teachings. These aphorisms have now become a patrimony of wisdom as it were for Christian spirituality.² St Philip appears against the background of the Roman Renaissance as the "*prophet of joy*", who had decided to follow Jesus, even while being actively involved in the culture of his time, which in many respects is particularly close to that of today. Humanism, which was completely focused on man and his remarkable intellectual and practical abilities, offered the rediscovery of a joyous naturalistic freshness, without obstacles or inhibitions, as a reaction to a certain ill-conceived medieval dourness. Man, considered almost as a pagan god, thus became the absolute protagonist. Furthermore, a sort of revision of the moral law was worked out with the objective of finding and guaranteeing happiness. St Philip, who was conscious of the aspirations of the society of his time, did not deny this yearning for joy but undertook to propose its true source, which he had discovered in the Gospel message. *It is the word of Christ that traces the true image of man*, revealing those features that make him a beloved child of the Father, accepted as a brother by the Incarnate Word and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. It is the laws of the Gospel and the commandments of Christ that lead to joy and happiness: this is the truth proclaimed by St Philip Neri to the young people he met in his daily apostolate. His was *a message dictated by the intimate experience he had of God especially in prayer*. His nightly prayer in the Catacombs of St Sebastian, where he often withdrew, was not just a search for solitude, but rather a desire to spend time conversing with the witnesses of the faith, to question them - just as the

Renaissance scholars used to weave conversations with the Classics of antiquity: and from knowledge came imitation and then emulation. In St Philip, to whom the Spirit gave a *"heart of fire"* as he kept vigil on the eve of Pentecost in 1544, it is possible to glimpse the allegory of the *great and divine transformations brought about through prayer*. A productive and sure programme of formation for joy - our saint teaches - is nourished and rests on a harmonious constellation of choices: assiduous *prayer*, frequent *Communion*, rediscovery and use of the *sacrament of Reconciliation*, daily and familiar contact with the *word of God*, the fruitful exercise of fraternal *charity* and service; and then *devotion to Our Lady*, the model and true cause of our joy. In this regard, how can we forget his wise and efficacious warning: "My children, be devoted to Mary: I know what I am saying! Be devoted to Mary!".³ Called by antonomasia the "saint of joy", St Philip must also be recognized as the *"Apostle of Rome"*, indeed as the *"reformer of the Eternal City"*. This he became almost by a natural evolution and development of the choices made under the guidance of grace. He truly was the *light* and *salt* of Rome, in the words of the Gospel (cf. Mt 5:13:16). He knew how to be "light" in that culture which was certainly splendid, but often only because of the indirect, glancing rays of paganism. In this social context, Philip was deferential to authority, very devoted to the deposit of truth, intrepid in announcing the Christian message. Thus he was a source of light for everyone. He did not choose the life of solitude; but, in exercising his ministry among the common people, he also wished to be "salt" for all those who met him. Like Jesus, he was equally able to enter into the human misery present in the noble palaces and in the alleys of Renaissance Rome. He was, at the same time, a *Cyrenean and a critical conscience, an enlightened adviser and a smiling teacher*. For this reason, he did not adopt Rome so much as Rome adopted him! He lived for 60 years in this city, which meanwhile was becoming populated with saints. Even if in the streets he met suffering humanity, and comforted and sustained it with the charity of a wise and very human word, he preferred to *gather young people in the Oratory, his true invention!* He made it a place of joyful meeting, a training ground for formation, a centre of artistic enlightenment. It was in the Oratory that St Philip, together with cultivating piety in its traditional and new expressions, undertook to *reform and elevate art, restoring it to the service of God and the Church*. Convinced as he was that beauty leads to goodness, he brought all that had an artistic stamp within the realm of his educational project. And he himself became a patron of various artistic forms, promoting sound initiatives that led to truth and goodness. The contribution made by St Philip to sacred music was incisive and exemplary; he urged it to be elevated from a source of foolish amusement to being a *re-creation for the spirit*. It was due to his initiative that musicians and composers began a reform that was to reach its highest peak in Pierluigi da Palestrina.⁴ May St Philip, loving and generous man, chaste and humble saint, active and contemplative apostle, remain the *constant model of the members of the Congregation of the Oratory!* He offers all the Oratorians a plan and style of life that even today have a particular timeliness. May his so-called "quadrilateral" - *humility, charity, prayer and joy* - continue to be a most sound basis on which to build the interior edifice of one's spiritual life. If they can follow their founder's example, the Oratorians will continue to carry out a significant role in Church affairs. I therefore exhort all the sons and daughters of St Philip Neri always to be faithful to the Oratorian vocation, by seeking Christ, following him with perseverance and becoming *generous sowers of joy among young people*, who are so often tempted to discouragement and lack of confidence. With these wishes I wish to invoke the heavenly protection of St Philip Neri on the whole Oratorian Community, while expressing my cordial wish that the jubilee celebrations will become an occasion for a *stimulating rediscovery of the figure and work of this special witness to Christ*, who can still teach so much, at the close of this century, to all Christians involved in the *new evangelization*. I accompany these wishes with a special Apostolic Blessing, which I sincerely impart to you, to the members of the Confederation of the Oratory and to all those who draw from the spirituality of the "saint of joy". *From the Vatican, 7 October 1994.* JOHN PAUL II

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