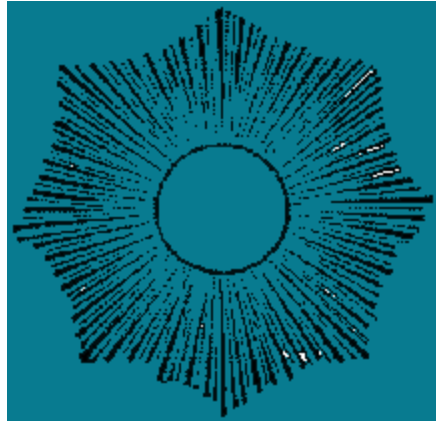


The Oratory: An open contemplative community.....
By Fr. Halbert Weidner, C.O.



What we need today are heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity— who have shared to the full in the joys and the hopes, in the anguish and the sadness of our day, but who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God.

Pope John Paul II

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The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the field; it is the smallest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Matthew 13

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The Oratory: An open contemplative community.....

The Oratory

Traveling Light

It is easier to say what the Oratory of St Philip Neri is not. It is not a religious order because the founder would not allow vows, oaths, or promises. It is a community but bound by mutual regard. It is not a cloistered community even though it fosters contemplative prayer. It is not separated from the world around it, but it does call people aside for prayer and helps form them in spirituality and service. Today it exists in Europe, the Americas, and Africa. There are about 75 Congregations in the Oratorian Confederation. Some 25 new houses are in formation.

The Oratory as a whole is made up of laity who are served by a Congregation of secular priests and brothers. You are invited to consider the Oratory of St Philip Neri as it exists today and as it is being founded in Hawai'i. There is a four hundred year old history beginning in Rome. We hope there is a future as the gift of St. Philip's Oratory takes root in Hawai'i.



St Philip Neri: Founder Despite Himself

No one can understand the Oratory without knowing the life of St. Philip Neri. The group now known as the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri claims him as founder. Msgr. Ronald Knox would say four hundred years later that Philip “absent-mindedly” founded the community that was originally and simply a movement centered around friendship with him. Neri, by all accounts, was lovable, playful and an individual who found it impossible to be anything else but original. He was a Florentine dropout from school and business who came to Rome in 1534 to pray in solitude in the catacombs and lead a contemplative life as a layman. He was only 19. Gradually drawn into the affairs of Rome, Philip was interested in reform and renewal but did not use the methods of his fiery hero Savonarola. He drew on the strength provided by his capacity for self-presence and friendship. From his arrival in Rome until his death in 1595, Philip was part of a reform movement known for its humanity, sense of community, and deep prayer. The works he and his friends chose to do were only the things that need doing: hospital care, prison outreach, and alleviating the desperation of the poor. That they were directed by an independent layman was unique. He and his friends met in churches for prayer, from these informal gatherings they went about their work. Philip became known for two effective gifts: healing and converting the indifferent. Even in our more scientific age, there seems ample evidence that Philip’s contact with the sick was a powerful moment that often led to the recovery of health.

His conversions were on almost all occasions a matter of making Catholics out of Catholics. Philip had managed to effect change in some very hardened Romans who were trapped between the ease offered by the glories and corruptions of the Renaissance and their fear of the ascetical demands of typical Counter Reformation piety. That some of these conversions occurred in the Roman Curia made Philip well-known at a time when the Medici controlled College of Cardinals was especially resistant to reform.

When Philip was 35, rather late in the life span typical of the times, he was ordained. This was at the insistence of his spiritual director who believed he could be more effective as a priest. Philip moved in with a group of secular priests living informally as a community. He began spiritual direction in his room when not engaged in reconciliation in the confessional. His appeal to so many resulted in formal gatherings each afternoon for prayer, lay preaching, and faith sharing. Scripture was read and hymns sung in the vernacular. In the evening they gathered for daily silent prayer together. To some, this group looked like a Protestant sect nestled in the bosom of Rome. During Philip's life he and his followers ran afoul of more than one suspicious prelate even to the point of Philip being suspended for the duration of one of the investigations.

The formal "Congregation of the Oratory" was begun in 1575, some 25 years after Philip's ordination and the beginning of the Oratory as a lay movement. Some of his followers had gotten ordained and wanted to live in community. They received permission—but no money—for a building for themselves and a church for the gathering of the Oratory. They built a new church in the center of Rome dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. Today it is still popularly known as the Chiesa Nuova—the "new church." There was loss and gain in this new move, and Philip did not entirely encourage it. The Congregation was subsequent to the Oratory and Philip did not want to lose sight of this. The laity were not a "third order" or "oblates", but *first*. It was the Congregation of priests and brothers who were *second*.

Safeguarding the Original Charism

Ten years after the Pope authorized the Congregation of Priests and Brothers, Baronius, the famous historian and Oratorian Cardinal, would lament that the Oratory was not what it had been. For the sake of establishing a core community and in the face of measures taken by the Council of Trent against lay preaching, the Oratory had lost some of its spontaneity and lay orientation.

Philip himself would not go and live with the Congregation until he became too old to protest his being moved. In typical fashion he had his revenge by insisting his goods be removed in a procession: each item—spoon, chair, chamber pot, and all the rest—be carried individually by his followers in a line to the new building. He also maintained his individuality by not giving up his old apartment and allowing his cat to stay comfortable in the old rooms. Each day someone had to go and feed the cat. (When the cat eventually died, the attendants had a party!)

As Philip got settled in the new place, he had a balcony built so he could go outside and see the stars and city at night. It was his favorite place for prayer. He also had a special entrance through the church built so clients could get to him without going through the main house. He had always lived with the key to his room under the welcome mat and never gave up that practice. He avoided most of the community gatherings except for prayer and picnics. Despite this odd behavior, he had to fight off being made a Cardinal.



Philip was canonized in 1622, thirty seven years after his death. The same day the Pope canonized Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, Isidore, and Francis Xavier. The happy Romans ran through the streets shouting that the Pope had canonized four Spaniards and a saint!

During his life, Philip had never written a rule and only allowed a set of guidelines to be drawn up from the practical experiences of living together. These were revised from time to time. The Constitutions were worked on in committee for nearly two decades without producing anything that Philip would sign as definitive. He did explicitly exclude some features common in religious orders. He would not permit any vows, oaths or promises.

He believed that there were too many religious orders already, and did not want to add to their numbers. The early chapters of the Book of Acts were to be sufficient for the ideal: we are gathered in love; where love is God is.

There was another peculiarity of Philip, especially in a time where centralization was believed to be the best method for preserving faithfulness in the religious life. Philip would not allow dependent houses. Each house had to make a go of its own. He was wary of trying to translate from one place to another one set of methods and way of life. Philip was setting up the Congregations for collapse. It would take Divine Providence—not central headquarters—to keep each place going. The Oratory had all the strength and the vulnerability of a pilgrim people.

The Need for the Oratory Today

The attraction of a community like Taizé in France or San Egidio in Rome, the popularity of cloistered communities and spiritual writers indicates a hunger today for contact with contemplative prayer and places that provide for it. At the same time there is also a desire for community and for works of justice.



When the Oratory began most monastic communities were in crisis. Much of the contemplative tradition had been lost. Philip was a natural man of prayer. He also knew the tradition of the Desert. He was schooled in solitude in the catacombs where he was for all practical purposes a hermit. But his mysticism and prayer were not for the cloister.

The afternoon gatherings were formational: the Bible and especially the Conferences of John Cassian which treated of the teachings of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers. There was time to pray and sing, to share faith. The ministries that followed flowed out of the prayer.

Today a simple house of prayer like the Oratory can answer the need of many different parts of our society.

The civic community is aware of the benefits to health and psyche that meditation and certain spiritual disciplines bring. More than 50 medical schools have introduced courses in spirituality. The Journal of the American Medical Association has surveyed the legitimacy of studies demonstrating the good effects of spirituality. The civic community needs a place of hospitality and spirituality.

The religious community of different faiths needs an accessible community where spirituality is lived out and where dialogue between the different religions can take place on an experiential basis.

The Christian community needs a place where everyone is welcome. While the Eucharist can still divide, meditation practices can bring people together.

The Catholic community needs something to replace the closures of so many religious houses that were accessible in the neighborhoods. The Oratory is not a monastery or retreat house out in the country. It is meant to be part of everyone's secular, daily life.

Many Catholic parishes have had programs like Renew where people come together for faith sharing and prayer. The Oratory is simply a perpetual, four hundred year old Renew program! The gathering of the Secular Oratory and the simple way of life of the Congregation based on trust and loving relationships is the fruit of gathering for faith sharing.

When John Henry Newman was an Anglican, he explored the great principle that makes an Oratory or a simple program like Renew work.

In the early 1830s, Newman preached:

Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, why our attachments are so poor, our view of life so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which really would be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly: we do not lay the foundation of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man: we make clean the outside of things: we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straightened, and we fear to let intercourse begin at the root: and in consequence, our religion viewed as a social system is hollow, the presence of Christ is not in it. (Plain and Parochial Sermons, V, pp. 126-7).

Henri Nouwen said that those who take Newman seriously have a ministry as wounded healers. An Oratory is very fragile, but the healing that comes from such delicacy can be a powerful sign of hearts speaking to hearts.



Lectio Divina and the Oratory

Besides the faith sharing, an Oratory is also a place for silence. Essentially, contemplative prayer is the silence that comes after an encounter with God's Word. What the early Oratory experienced in the afternoon sessions was shared Lectio Divina (reading of the Word). All this classic phrase says is that the

Word was read in common, meditated upon aloud (faith sharing) and this led to silence or contemplative prayer. The gathering in silence in the evening was a continuation of the more extraverted afternoon prayer.

This sense that contemplative prayer comes from an encounter with the Word, makes the Oratory a great instrument in the continuing dialogue between Catholicism and Protestantism.

The centrality of John Cassian's influence on the early meditation practices within the Oratory also provides a bridge to the Orthodox Church. The prayer rope used by the Orthodox and the devotion to the Jesus prayer in such a classic as *The Way of the Pilgrim* are reflected in the practices of St Philip when he made prayer beads for his followers and instructed them in the prayer of the heart. Most of the prayer he taught came from the scriptures and were adjusted to each of the personalities of the disciples.

The Oratory in Hawai'i

A New Foundation

All of this has been general description. Now we come to the concrete experience of the new foundation in Hawai'i. Here I must be much more personal.

My family moved to the islands when I was 12 in 1959. I became a Catholic while on scholarship at Punahou School, a Protestant prep school. I went to South Carolina to join the then only Oratory in Rock Hill. I did this after reading about Newman. I had never laid eyes on an Oratory or an Oratorian. One of the Maryknoll priests in the parish had been to Rock Hill to visit his sister and had gone bowling with some Oratorians, but that was all I knew from personal contacts.

I was drawn there because it was a simple house of prayer and community and had an impact on the dreadful poverty and racial injustice of its time and place. I intended to stay in South Carolina my whole life.

I served in parishes and campus ministry. I was the superior or provost for two terms. As a seminarian I earned an MA in theology and education at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. As a priest I earned a doctorate in theology from Oxford University. I have also managed to write a couple of books and to lecture.

Hawai'i was still my family home and I tried to get there as often as I could. During one home visit in the 1980s I was asked by a Maryknoll regional superior if I would stay and be a priest in the islands. There has always been a great need, but I thought I should be an Oratorian. He suggested that I bring the Oratory to Honolulu. I let that pass; however, I did think about it. In my discernment I thought if someone else—not a family member or a friend—suggested the same project, I should think about it seriously.

In 1991 I came back to the islands to assist my mother and was on the staff of the Spiritual Life Center in Honolulu. In 1992, the vicar for religious—not a friend and not a family member—asked me to consider staying and bringing the Oratory to the islands! I was very interested in refounding the Oratory closer to its original roots of contemplative prayer and promoting the Secular Oratory so after another year, I had the necessary permissions and began the formation of the Oratory in Honolulu. I started first with the laity as St. Philip did. The laity must commit to the weekly meetings. There are now a dozen. It is this group that has sponsored the Congregation.

Mission, Practices, and Hopes

The Mission of the Oratory in Hawai'i

Working with the laity interested in the Oratory of St Philip Neri, we have dedicated ourselves to this mission:

To be an open contemplative community offering prayer and hospitality to anyone seeking God.

This is rather lofty, but it works out very simply in practice. The members of the Oratory wanting to be priests and brothers living together are the anchor of the daily prayer. We use a simple form of morning prayer borrowed from the Taizé community but we have added 20 minutes of Oratorian silence. Traditionally the Oratory gathers for 30 minutes of prayer, all but the final five minutes is silent. This seemed a little austere so we have sweetened it with the lovely music and simplicity of the Taizé community which in France attracts hundreds to its daily prayer the way St. Philip attracted people in his time in Rome. In the afternoon we gather again for some readings from Scripture and then more silent prayer before Mass and Vespers.

The laity are welcomed and do come to these gatherings. The numbers are not great but they are faithful and devoted. On Thursday evenings the people who want to be part of the Secular Oratory gather with us for supper, formation, and another round of prayer like the morning with 20 minutes of silence.

All of this takes place at Holy Trinity Church where I am the pastor.

From this have come the workshops, retreats, ecumenical and interfaith gatherings, spiritual direction ministry, as well as articles, reviews and books, as well as an active parish ministry and teaching.

Hopes for the Future

We are founding an Oratory first of all rooted in the Roman Catholic Church proclamation of Jesus Christ. As Roman Catholics and because we are Catholics, we have an ecumenical and interfaith ministry since a life of contemplative prayer unites us in a search for Christian unity and peace among the different religions. Certainly there will be no world peace if the different religions remain hostile and unknown to each other. We are also a community that is, like the islands, multi-cultural and multi-racial. There is no racial majority in the islands nor is there a dominant culture. The islands are part of the USA and there are typically American things here. But the way of life and attitudes are different. It takes an adjustment to see this and to appreciate it.

Multicultural

In the little community today, there are four languages. We are open to vocations from all over the world, but especially from the Pacific rim including Canada, Mexico, Central and South America. The Oratory to be of service to the local Church in these islands should look like the local Church which is made up of dozens of languages and more than three dozen nationalities. If the Oratory can be multinational, paying the price this calls for, it will reap many benefits and blessings for the effort.

Ecumenical

Because of the emphasis on contemplative prayer as a core experience, the Oratory has an ecumenical ministry. Where Eucharist still divides, contemplative prayer unites. Outreach to the different Protestant churches has been part of the Oratorian ministry since I arrived here in 1991. The Protestant Churches in Hawai'i are numerically smaller than the Catholic Church and there is still a great deal of distance between

the different churches. Nevertheless there have been good occasions of sharing and most of these have been in two areas: spirituality and service to the poor. There is work here for an Oratory to do.



Interfaith

The Hawaiian Islands are home to all the major religions of the world. A house of prayer and hospitality can be the place where people who belong to the different faiths can come and dialogue. The members are educated so that they can speak intelligently about their faith and reflect on the faith of others. The members also are faithful to a spiritual discipline that allows them to speak of common religious experiences such as silence, trust, surrender.

A Summary in One Symbol

The Logo

The logo of the Oratory in Hawai'i was designed by Maryknoll Sister Yoo Soo Kim. The taro plant is the staple food of the islands. It is a root that is pounded into poi. If you cut across the root you get something that looks like the logo. There is a cross. This cross of Jesus is what feeds us. The islands are also a cross roads and people come from all four directions to live here. With them comes the gift of the Holy Spirit that maintains both the diversity of the people and their unity. Together we are called to the silence of love in the presence of God the Father of all.

This little community gathered at the Oratory is part of the diversity of Hawai'i and part of what contributes to a sense of unity, to a sense of aloha.



You Are Invited

You are invited to invest in the Oratory

- To provide the healing and unity that comes from sitting still together in a house of prayer.

- To assist as a Catholic the foundation of a four hundred year old gift of the Church of Rome adapting to a new age and a new place.
- To provide as a Christian a place of welcome and dialogue for other Christians .
- To establish as a religious person a place for shared experience in contemplation and to witness to its gift of peace.

To contribute as a member of the civic community to a center where healing and reconciliation can take place and where the practical benefits of spiritual discipline will enrich all of our lives.

Our Motivation

From the Constitutions of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri...

“Oratory” is the name we use for a place destined for prayer. So the Oratory founded by St Philip Neri took its name from a place of prayer. The Oratory is a fraternal union of the faithful who, following the lines laid down by St Philip, aim at what he taught and did, and so become, “one heart, one mind”. Acts 4:32

The Oratory was established from its very birth for familiar discourse on the Word of God, for mental and vocal prayer in common. By these means the Oratory fosters the contemplative spirit and love of divine things among the faithful as in a school. As St. Philip was a sign of this love of divine things, so the Oratory demonstrates the same love in an attractive and effective way, through joyful service and simplicity of heart.



Heart Speaks to Heart

From Pope John Paul II...

Along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to common prayer, the prayerful union of those who gather around Christ himself...If Christians meet more often and more regularly before Christ in prayer, they will be able to gain the courage to face all the painful human reality of their divisions, and they will find themselves together once more in that community of the Church which Christ constantly builds up in the Holy Spirit, in spite of all weaknesses and human limitations...Fellowship in prayer leads people to look at the Church and Christianity in a new way. That All Might Be One, #22. #23

From Cardinal Newman...

It was the mission of St Philip Neri to save people, not from, but in the world.

From the Bible

...in quietness and trust shall be your strength
Isaiah 30:15

...my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.
Isaiah 56:7

...pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
1 Thessalonians 5:17

Lord, teach us to pray...
Luke 11:1



All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. Acts 1:14