

## **The Oratory and the Ashram: What if Philip Neri Had Gone to India**

*By Fr. Halbert Weidner, C.O.*

Philip Neri is called the Apostle of Rome because through the Oratory movement he had the task of making Catholics out of the Catholics of Rome, not the least among them a number of curial officials and cardinals.

Philip's first choice was to follow Francis Xavier whose letters had excited him and his followers. He bowed to a mystical Cistercian who told him that "Rome is to be your Indies." But what if Philip had come to India and had come not as a missionary, but as the holy man he was with his particular experiences and ideas about the Oratory?

I believe that Philip would have found deeply religious people with similar experiences and ideas only instead of being Catholics attracted to the Oratory, it would have been Hindus seeking God in ashrams. On the whole, I think he would have found the milieu sympathetic so I want in this article to compare the Oratory and experiences of Philip with what is said of the ashram. I hope that this will contribute something to the Christian ashram movement.

### **I. The Cave**

Philip was attracted to caves. He made his decision to leave the business world and seek God as a wandering hermit in Rome while praying in a grotto shrine founded by Benedictine monks from Monte Cassino. In Rome, he went to the only catacomb then available, San Sabastiano, to pray. There in that catacomb, as a lay man at the age of 29, about the time of Pentecost, Philip's own heart, his cave within, was visited by an extraordinary experience of fire, and the divine Presence within, that threw him to the ground and physically changed him. This was a decisive moment in his life as a hermit and man of prayer. During this time, still a layman and with no consideration of priesthood, disciples began to form around him.

The cave of the heart or guha is so central to the Upanishads and to St. Philip that I believe that this quotation from the Chandogya Upanishad could serve as a mission statement for the Oratory, the house of prayer movement that eventually gathered around him.

OM. In the centre of the castle of Brahman, our own body, there is a small shrine in the form of a lotus-flower, and within can be found a small space. We should find who dwells there, and we should want to know him. And if anyone asks, 'Who is he who dwells in a small shrine in the form of a lotus-

flower in the centre of the castle of Brahman? Whom should we want to find and to know?' we can answer:

'The little space within the heart is as great as this vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars; fire and lightning and winds are there; and all that now is and all that is not; for the whole universe is in Him and He dwells within our heart.' (Chan. Up 8)

It was this experience from which Philip spoke and no wonder that his disciples took his words seriously. If Philip had gone to India and someone had asked him, 'Can you show me God?' he could have said yes from his own consciousness and experience. His innermost self where God works has been touched by Philip and this overflowed into the Oratory.

## **II. The Teacher**

Philip became a guru, that is one in whom the knowledge, bliss and consciousness of God led to a joy and wisdom which attracted people seeking the divine Presence. Before disciples came he was already what the Hindus call a sannyasi, a lay man, living a renunciate life of extreme simplicity, prayer, and service as a wandering hermit.

So, the Oratory was born. Philip preached and led prayer as a layman until his own spiritual director moved him into a church to continue the prayer and teachings. This too has its Indian equivalent. It was very much like a sat sangh, or gathering together in the Presence, for talks, prayer and meditation such as one finds in ashram life. The lay character of the Oratory, a life without formal religious vows, did not change. The participants, even the teachers and preachers, were laity gathered around Philip. It was a flexible structure not encompassed or even imagined by canonists. But it was and is imagined in India and carried out to this day as the usual, rather than unusual, way of life for religious seekers.

## **III. Mantras**

Philip taught a very simple kind of centering prayer tailored to each disciple. The disciples closest to him gathered together for this daily and sometimes used the beads that Philip loved to make for them.

The Indian equivalent here is very striking also. The mantra is a simple prayer given to the disciple by the teacher, but especially and uniquely designed just for that person. Often a mala or rosary is used for the recitation of the prayer. It is more than just a vocal prayer because its simplicity leads the contemplative prayer or centering prayer taught by Cassian in his conferences and in Indian thought in what is called Japa Yoga or union with God in saying the sacred name.

#### **IV. The Oratory as an Ashram**

Philip refused to found a religious order. Those disciples who wished to gather around him and live together formally were allowed to, but he would not write a rule. They lived lives of extreme simplicity and were priest and laymen together. They became the leaders of what Indians would have recognized as the afternoon sat sangh or what we call the exercises of the Oratory.

But they remained merely the core group and the simple equivalent of the Oratory which in its largest sense was still a movement of many different people coming to Philip sometimes for life, sometimes for shorter periods.

In the Indian context, Philip would have been a sannyasi who never adopted the saffron robe, but would have remained forever a bramachari, in white, for all his life. He would have renounced the outward signs of renunciation, never aspiring to the perfection of those in public vows. And so his followers are obliged to remain. Whatever private vows are made outside of Church structure and according to the Holy Spirit, no Oratorian ever takes public ones.

The Oratorian constitutions are basically the ashram rules adopted from his time. If we use the features of an ashram given by Sister Vandana, RSCJ, in Gurus, Ashrams, and Christians, I believe that we will see these parallels between the ashram and the Oratory as a congregation:

- An experience of God. An Oratory is after all a house of prayer and takes its name from this place of serious spiritual endeavor or sadhana. It is a bold name because in the name of service, it can simply become a rectory from which busy laymen and priests come and go after a brief prayer together. But the name is a reminder that being a place of prayer is a ministry. The oratory is not a monastery, but a reminder that there is a contemplative life style outside of monasticism that is valid and vital.
- An atmosphere of peace. The Oratory is a reflective community where common life does not intrude on the quiet necessary for the Word to speak. Some are in fact shocked when they visit seculars living in community and find what they unhappily labeled 'Carthusianism' because the house was so quiet!
- An open community. Philip used to leave the key to his home under the doormat so that he was approachable. Somehow he carried on an intense prayer life within a truly open community. Oratories are still centers of hospitality and since they are each independent of the other, they are in solidarity with their neighbors.

- A simple and poor community. Philip lived in voluntary poverty. He encouraged this voluntary poverty in his followers, and that they follow him in using what they owned for others.
- Freedom and flexibility. Philip never wrote a rule for the community. The present constitutions are simply updated versions of the old house rules and have only the simplest and barest necessities of law. They allow for western style democracy in that the superior is elected every three years and major policy decisions are made by the membership, but they could also allow for a guru or acharya. John Henry Newman founded the Oratory he lived in as provost for life, a veritable guru figure in his community in 19th century Birmingham, England. And as a guru is 'made' by attracting disciples so a provost can be made by attracting them as an Oratory. Also the core group, no matter how stable and canonical, does not replace the necessity for the presence of others who would be within the Oratory but not as formal members. After all, central to the charism of the Oratory is the fact that the lay movement was the first organization and the Congregation came second. So today, the secular Oratory or non-permanent character remains as true an Oratory as those who intend the life permanently (and even they take no public vows).
- Indigenous and natural. This is not an explicit separate category for Sr. Vandana, but I would like to emphasize it. Philip did not believe that the Oratory could be duplicated exactly and refused to allow dependent houses. Each house that began took the central features and adopted them independently with no centralization. This has strengths and weaknesses. Before Napoleon's secularization swept Europe there were over 1700 Oratories dotted over most of it. It spread to Goa and through Joseph Vaz there were Oratorian Indians disguised as sādhus saving the Church in Sri Lanka. But the independence made it hard for the houses to revive. Today there are over 60 houses with 600 core members. Unfortunately, there are no more in India since that house was suppressed by Napoleonic pressure on the Portuguese.

## **V. Conclusion**

In summary, I think that it can be said that Philip's ideas and what he would have found in India are remarkably similar and might even speak today to the Christian Church in India as it lives in dialogue with its neighbors.

The Oratory is a non-monastic house of prayer with a flexible canonical core group whose charism is to foster a larger group in a life together for the

purpose of serious spiritual striving believing that the Spirit that came to the heart of Philip still leads people today toward that same experience.

The model might also speak to the West. The Oratory has a good reputation for its pastoral care, liturgy and simplicity of life. Might there be an interest in a more contemplative house where prayer is the ministry as it was in the early Oratory and from which the very name of the community comes?

In the houses themselves, we do not usually have a liturgy of the hours together because the Oratory exercises supposedly replaced the office of hours. But now what exists when the daily two hour Oratory exercise does not occur? What of those looking for a Tauler or a Suso or a Philip Neri? Where will they find it? Today in Paris, it is possible to find the Jerusalem community attracting hundreds daily for meditation and office and liturgy because it allows for silence and contemplation. Today in Rome, the San Egidio communities allow for daily gathering in prayer and ministry. Today in Taize, thousands of young people go off into the French countryside to pray and share their faith. Are these examples not an encouragement to the Oratory? We do not have to go to India, but we can start where we are.