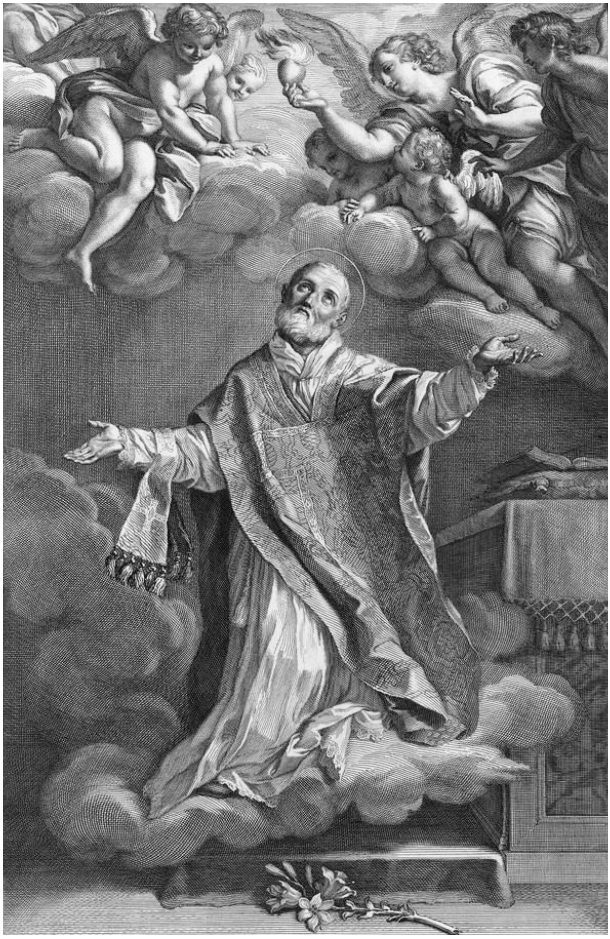
NOVENA IN PREPARATION FOR THE FEAST OF OUR HOLY FATHER ST PHILIP



DAY 1

St PHILIP NERI was born in Florence on July 2Ist, 1515. As a child he was noted for a rare modesty, seriousness, delight in prayer and in the things of God. He was ever most obedient; and his father's step-mother, who brought him up, loved him as her own son, and on her deathbed repeated his name again and again, saying that it refreshed her even to think of him. For his pure, sweet, winning ways he was known among his companions as good Pippo. His piety was simple and grave; he would pray, sing psalms, listen to sermons, rather than dress altars and the like.

And his prayers seemed to be always answered. He once recovered a gold necklace, which he had lost in the streets, by simply praying for it. His virtue was tried by many and grievous temptations.

On one occasion, when he was addressed by evil persons, who wished to lead him into sin, he spoke to them with such fervour of the foulness of their intent that he brought them to repentance; and when some persons had been hidden in his room, and had locked the door to prevent his escape, he knelt in prayer until these wretched creatures were forced to make their escape in shame and confusion. His purity shone on his face, beamed brightly from his eyes, even to extreme old age, and breathed from his hands and from his whole person a fragrance so rare, so unearthly, that within its presence all evil thoughts died away of themselves

DAY 2

When Philip was sixteen years of age, his father sent him to San Germano, near Naples, to learn the business and inherit the fortune of a cousin of his. His future thus seemed marked out for him and secured. While he was diligent and exact in his duties, he spent his spare time, and often his nights, in prayer before the crucifix in a lonely chapel amidst the mountains. At the end of two years he could no longer resist the drawing he felt to a higher life, and in spite of his cousin's urgent and affectionate entreaties he resolved to turn from the wealth which would be his, and to take God alone for his portion. In the year 1533, he set out for Rome, alone, with no provision for the way, no resources, no plans, simply following the inward call of God. He was guided to the house of a Florentine gentleman whose two sons he educated, training them in such virtuous ways that they grew up as angels of purity and innocence. His life was one of extreme austerity. His single daily meal was of bread and water, with sometimes herbs or a few olives, and he would pass three days without food. His few clothes hung on a cord stretched across his room, the floor of which was his bed, and thus he lived, according to his heart's de-sire, for God alone, in absolute detachment and poverty, with no thought or care for the future, his life hidden with Christ in God.

DAY 3

When Philip thought he had studied enough for his souls good, he sold his books, gave their price to the poor, and applied his whole soul to prayer and the attainment of perfection.

He increased his mortifications, slept but little, and mostly on the bare ground, disciplined himself with small iron chains, and lived a life of silence, calm amidst the tumult of the great city, alone amidst its busy multitudes. At night he would go round the seven churches, a distance of about twelve miles, and if they were closed, he would remain in prayer at their doors. He would pray at times for forty hours without intermission; and so overpowering were the graces and consolations vouchsafed to him, that he would roll on the ground, crying, 'No more, Lord, no more!' At Whitsuntide, 1544, Philip being then in his thirtieth year, while he was praying most fervently in the catacomb of San Sebastian for the gift of the Holy Spirit, there came suddenly from heaven as it were a ball of fire, which entered into his breast, bursting asunder two of his ribs, and leaving a swelling as large as the fist. This swelling continued throughout his life for fifty years, giving him no pain, only an intense glow of heat. It would palpitate joyously and impetuously when he was speaking of the things of God, or praying, saying Mass, giving absolution and Holy Communion, and it filled his whole soul with the love of God.

DAY 4

After five years of solitude and prayer, Philip felt constrained to labour for souls. So he began to go about the squares and shops, saying to the young men, 'Well, my brothers, when shall we begin to do good?' In this way he won very many to God, not only of the careless and tepid, but of the most hardened sinners. A few of these met together with Philip to receive the Sacraments, and for other pious exercises; and on the first Sunday in each month they watched in turn before the Blessed Sacrament.

Thus was introduced into Rome the Forty Hours' prayer, which had begun six years before in Milan. In 1550 they set about receiving poor convalescents and the numerous pilgrims who flocked to Rome especially during the Jubilee. They began with a small house, which in time expanded into the great establishment of the Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini. And now his confessor, seeing his great power with souls, urged him to prepare for holy orders; and, in spite of his humble reluctance, he was ordained priest on May 23rd, 1551. He then went to live with his confessor, and a few other holy priests, at the church of San Girolamo della Carità. Here Philip began the practice, which he never interrupted, of saying Mass daily; and he said it was a great mistake to omit Mass for the sake of rest or recreation; for that he who looks for recreation out of the Creator, or for rest out of Christ, would never find either.

DAY 5

St Philip lived in troubled times, when amidst wars and civil strife men had forgotten God. His first aim therefore was to bring them back to the Holy Sacraments. To this end he was always ready to receive those who came to him. Before sunrise he had heard many confessions in his own room; at daybreak he would go down into the church, and remain in his confessional the whole morning, except while he was saying Mass. He invited young men to his room daily, and discoursed with them in the most winning way on the things of God. Then he would take them with him to some church, for Compline or Matins; and thus many youths and even men passed almost the whole day in his company. When some remonstrated with him for making himself so common, and for the noise he allowed his younger children to make, he said that he wished to have neither hour nor time to himself, and that if he could only keep his children from sin, they might chop wood on his back. And thus St Philip's room was ever open to all who sought guidance, instruction, or refreshment, and men came to call it the school of holiness, and the sheltered home of Christian mirth. In this simple way, he drew souls to him as a magnet draws iron, and taught them how to sanctify themselves in the world and by means of their daily duties.

DAY 6

The reports of the Jesuit missionaries inspired Philip with a wish to go out himself to India, labour there for souls, and, if need be, shed his blood for Christ; but a holy monk, whom he consulted, told him that it was the will of God that he should find his Indies in Rome. The Saint at once accepted his mission, and for sixty years never left Rome again. He toiled on simply, earnestly, joyously, amidst insult and opposition, gaining innumerable souls to God. As his own room became too small for the throng of his disciples, he transferred their meetings to an oratory in the church of San Girolamo, and gave their exercises a set form. There was mental and vocal prayer, spiritual reading, simple, solid and varied instruction, interspersed with bright and cheerful singing. Three times a week they took the discipline, in memory of our Lord's Passion; and thus, says Baronius, the Saint brought back in all their simplicity the days of the Primitive Church. Rich and poor, the wise and the simple, merchants and artisans, learned of him how to sanctify common life and to live in the world in union with God. Around his confessional, hanging on his lips, were the children of those who had been the turbulent oppressors of the Church. Jews, apostates, and heretics were brought into the one fold, and many a seemingly obdurate sinner owed his conversion to a chance visit to Philip's simple services at San Girolamo della Carità.

DAY 7

In 1564, at the request of the Florentines and by order of Pius IV, Philip took charge of their church of St John, and sent Baronius and others of his sons there, he himself remaining at San Girolamo. Ten years later, the Florentines having built a spacious oratory at St John's, prevailed on Philip to transfer the exercises to it, and they were more frequented and more fruitful than ever. But a wretched calumny, which had led the Florentines to think of taking their church from him, showed the Saint that the community now needed a secure foundation and a church of its own. Gregory XIII gave him the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, and by a Bull dated July 15th, 1575, erected in it a congregation of secular priests, under the name of the Congregation of the Oratory. The church was small and ruinous, and Philip's first care was to rebuild it. He had no funds, but he had great faith. 'I know God will help me,' he said. He refused to beg, but donations, unexpected and sufficient, came in as they were needed. The enemies of the Saint opposed him in every way, and even assaulted the workmen. Our Lady averted a terrible accident. Philip was miraculously cured of a dangerous illness by receiving Holy Communion; and on February 23rd, 1577, within eighteen months from the laying of the foundation, Mass was sung in the grand church, still called the Chiesa Nuova.

DAY 8

So Much did Philip shrink from being looked on as the founder of the Oratory that, for six long years after it was set up, he persisted in living away from it at San Girolamo. At length, to the great joy of his sons, the Pope commanded him to take up his abode with them at the Vallicella on St Cecilia's day, 1583. He could not avoid being chosen Superior for life; but he stripped the office of all outward distinction, and would have no other title than that of 'Father.' He directed that his sons should live as secular priests, without vows, bound together by the simple tie of charity; and that their aim should be the conversion and sanctification of souls by means of prayer, daily preaching, and frequentation of the Sacraments. He made few rules, but he would have those few perfectly kept. He had great horror of disobedience, and would keep no subject, however gifted in other respects, who did not at once gladly obey. He said, touching his forehead as he spoke, that a man's holiness lies really within the space of three fingers, meaning in the mortification of the understanding. He was always breaking down the pride of his children, priests or laymen, by penances or humiliations, often small in themselves, but always severe and searching as tests. It was noted that these were adapted with exquisite discrimination to the characters and needs of his penitents, and never failed of their effect.

DAY 9

On May 15th, 1595, Philip said, 'In ten days I shall go? He was in his eightieth year, apparently in perfect health, and his doctor said he had not seen him so well for ten years. But his work was done. Rome was entirely changed; the great religious Orders were filled with his penitents, Saints formed by him were winning souls to God, his congregation was established, and new houses were springing up; his silent toil of sixty years was bearing its abundant fruit. May 25th was the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Philip heard confessions at his usual early hour, and took leave of his penitents with even more than his wonted tenderness, asking them to say a Rosary, and to pray for him when he was gone. As he began his last Mass, his eye rested long on Sant Onofrio; at the Gloria in excelsis he burst out into singing, and throughout the Mass he was as though he were chanting the fulness of his joy. The day passed as usual. He said Matins of the morrow, and at eleven he went to bed, saying 'Well, at last one must die.' At two o'clock Er Gallonio heard him move, and went to him. 'Antonio, said the Saint, 'I am going now.' Baronius commended his soul to God, and then said, 'Father, you are going; have you nothing to say to us? Give us at least your blessing.' Philip raised his hand, looked a while towards heaven; then turned his eyes around on his sons, as if giving his benediction, and closed them in death.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SANCTE PHILIPPE NERI
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