

I would like to come back to St Philip Neri, an Italian priest from the 1500's, whose memorial was a week ago last Tuesday (May 26). Like with all the saints, there is much that be gleaned from his life and example.

St Philip Neri was born in Florence, Italy in 1515. His mother died when he was young. Although his dad remarried a lady who served as a good stepmother, losing one's mother, especially at such a young age, is a great loss. It is not uncommon for our Lord to prepare people for great work by first stripping away the things of this life and this world that they might cling to in place of Him. The death of Philip Neri's mom when he was young reminds me of Pope St John Paul II. By the time he was in early 20's, all of his family members had died. The greater the mission, the greater the stripping. God, however, gives everyone – every single person – a participation in His work, a mission, a part in building up our Father's Kingdom. It makes me ask: do I resist by clinging to the things of this life and this world, acting as if these things are life rather than God?

When he was 18 years old, Philip was sent to be an apprentice in business with one of his relatives. It was here, shortly after his arrival, that he had a "mystical" experience, some deeper "encounter" with the Lord, leading him into a deep conversion. Is the Lord only willing to bring about this sort of conversion for a few select people – maybe just those who will go on to become canonized saints? Most certainly not. In fact, very much the opposite. He became man and suffered His Passion precisely because He wants to do this exact same thing with each, thus building a deep, personal interior relation with us. But as we have said over and over again, we have to open the door by seeking the Lord through personal prayer, Mass including weekday Mass if you can make it, frequent (monthly) Confession, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, study of the faith, and so on. As we have said before, the command to seek is probably the most important command that our Lord gave us, and perhaps the one most often failed. It is tied to the first commandment. If you really start seeking, the Lord Himself has guaranteed that you *will* find.

After this "mystical" or conversion experience, the future saint set out for Rome. Given his later vocation and work in Rome, it seems pretty clear now that it was the Lord Himself, the Spirit of God, who inspired him to go to Rome. This brings us to another point of reflection from the life of St Philip Neri. First, maybe the obvious – if a person really enters into conversion with all humility, the Lord Himself becomes their guide; they are able to follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, subject to the guideposts of the Church. But there is something more here. He set out for Rome with essentially no money and no prior arrangements as to where he would stay or how he would live when he got there; the Lord inspired him to go and he went without worrying about these things. He simply wanted to respond the Lord. This sort of thing might be easier to do when we are younger. But why is that? There might be a number of things at play but perhaps a big one is a tendency to start to cling to things of this life and this world more and more as we get older; the result is that these things end up being our master rather than our servant. This is not a call to be reckless or lazy; if you have a family, for example, you have to think about how you will provide for them and so on. It is not a call to be reckless or lazy but it is a call to think about if "stuff" is controlling me, if I am holding on to the things of this life and this world (which could be intangible things like human respect for example) too much, in such a way that I can no longer live and move and have my being, that it is preventing me from following the Lord with my whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

When Philip got to Rome, he found a man who let live in his attic in exchange for tutoring his kids. The attic had the bare minimum but it was enough. This is also a characteristic that maybe we lose as we get older – the capacity to be happy with what we have materially, not caring about any extra superfluities: ok, I've got a room, some clothes, and some food, I have everything I need, that's it and now I can focus on what's important.

Philip's time in that attic is one of the most important aspects of his life that I want to come to. For 2 years, while living in that sparse attic with sparse food, Philip basically withdrew from the world. Except for the tutoring that he had been hired for, he lived as a recluse in that attic for 2 years. This is something you see over and over again in the lives of the saints. This time of withdrawal is a time of preparation. Preparation for what?

The saint doesn't know at the time; in fact, in all likelihood they don't even realize that "preparation" is occurring; all they know is that they want to seek the Lord.

Although there are many helpful things that can be taken from the life of St Philip Neri, it is his time of withdrawal from the world that I most want to bring out. It is true that St Philip Neri went on to do a good number of "significant" or "big" things in Rome as a priest and spiritual director. But the Lord gives everyone, and certainly all baptized Catholics, a significant role in the building up of the Kingdom of God. How about parents? Parents have been given a serious responsibility in building up the Kingdom of God. How about those called to care for elderly parents or CCD teachers? Yes, everyone, has been given a serious role in building up the Kingdom of God. And just like Philip Neri and all the other saints, everyone needs this time of silence, time of silent recollection with the Lord, in order to carry out that God-given mission.

While the preparation period might be more pronounced and intense for someone with St Philip's particular vocation, it is necessary for everyone. Although I've been using Philip's 2 years of almost complete withdrawal from the world to illustrate the point, we should say that what's been called "preparation" here is not something that is once and done. It is something that needs to continue throughout one's whole life, and on a daily basis. What this means is some daily silence, withdrawing from everything else (withdraw from the world and all other responsibilities), and really raising your mind to the Lord. How? If you don't have a habit of daily prayer, start with an Our Father in the morning and a Hail Mary at night – but don't just rattle off words. That's not withdrawing from the world to be with the Lord. Put everything else out of your mind, take your time, and say the prayer thoughtfully. If you can, stop by the church to pay the Lord a visit and withdraw from the world for a short time. This will not hamper your life here on earth, it will enhance it.

After his 2 years of seclusion, he began to study philosophy and theology with great rigor. This too is a good lesson for us – to listen and learn what God has revealed; rely on the Church and her good teachers to show us the way. The teachings that our Lord gives us in and through His Church not only lead us closer to Him by helping to know Him better, but they also serve as guardrails; these teachings give us clear lines that we know not to cross. Knowing the Lord by knowing what He has revealed is an exercise in humility, a recognition that I need it, that it is not just me and my opinion or my feelings because, after all, I am so brilliant and wonderful!

After 3 years, an interior prompting led Philip to stop his studies and begin to go out into the city of Rome to "evangelize" – to teach the faith and get people to respond to it. St Philip was not yet a priest when he first began this endeavor. In a very broad sense, we might say that he used the social media of his time to do this. To this day, those who live in Rome spend a fair amount of time at outdoor cafes and restaurants, talking and visiting. This was the case in St Philip Neri's day as well and he would go to these places, get to know people a little, and then eventually come around to the topic of serving the Lord. He was known for starting out with something like: well, brothers, when are we going to start to love the Lord, or: when are we going to start to do good. We are all meant to teach the faith in some way or another, although not necessarily in the exact way that St Philip Neri did. I, for example, never had the inclination to be on social media or the internet; in my own case, I think I am called to just be a simple parish priest. Others, however, do feel inclined to use social media, which is a good work if it is something God has called them to do. But an important principle here is that: I cannot give what I do not have. Recall the order that St Philip proceeded in: conversion, withdrawal from the world, intense study – *then* evangelization, inspired by the Lord. This is the order for everyone, regardless of how the Lord has called you to help build up the Kingdom of God. It might be through dedication of your whole life in a religious order – prayer and self-denial, through example (especially parents but also in the workplace), or maybe priesthood. Whatever way it is, it is a call to respond to, but preparation is needed.

St Philip Neri is known as the jocular saint, often using self-effacing humor. He would use humor to draw people in and put them ease. But he also used it to protect his own deep interior life, to protect his humility. St Philip was eventually ordained and he would often become enraptured during Mass, weeping tears at what He saw and experienced which was basically the great love of God. Perhaps he was most well-known as a spiritual director, some of which are now canonized saints. St Philip Neri – pray for us. *God bless you, Fr Kuhn*