

if natural things transcend it, what shall we say of the supernatural?

None is so happy as a true Christian, none so reasonable, none so virtuous, none so amiable.

ST. PHILIP NERI

(By J. KELLY, Ph.D.)

(Concluded from last week.)

In 1551, the Council of Trent sat for the second period. The Church was 'growing' in vigor, more capable than ever, and more efficient for the conquests still before her. The middle of the sixteenth century was full of clamor and bloodshed all over Europe. Holland and France had their share of it. England, too, had her baptism of blood; and England's vain efforts to make Ireland Protestant drove the 'mere Irish' out of their own land in thousands to become apostles of the faith in other countries. Huguenots and Calvinists and gueux were making history vigorously. But so was the new Order of Jesuits, and so, too, was the Council of Trent.

In 1551, Philip Neri was ordained priest. He left the house of Caccia now and went to dwell at *San Girolamo della Carita* with some other priests. From the beginning of his sacerdotal life his guiding maxim was *Sacerdos alter Christus*. In faith, in charity, his new life became the reflex of the life of Christ. In the process of his canonisation we are told that he had to exercise special vigilance during the celebration of Holy Mass; for so vivid was his realisation of the great sacrifice that he was prone to fall into ecstasies and protract it for hours. On the altar his face shone with radiance, the consecration was a moment of rapture, and the whole Mass a miracle of fervor.

But it was as a confessor that the divine attributes were most manifest in Philip's life. All the love and compassion of Him, Who, in His last breath, prayed for his executioners, Who, by Jacob's Well, touched the heart of the Samaritan, Who taught in the case of Magdalene that love, which many waters can not quench, pardons all, Who received the dying thief, and Who confounded the hypocrites who had no pity for the sinful woman, was before Philip whenever he sat in the tribunal of Penance. Every morning he came to his confessional in the Church of San Girolamo, and remained there usually till noon. He never seemed to weary of it. Men and women, young and old, innocent boys and girls, and hardened sinners were attracted to him in large numbers. And slowly and surely by this means a great reformation was taking place in the lives of the people of Rome. Frequent confession and Communion had not been practised up to his time. The greatest work of his life was surely that, during forty-five years as a priest, he taught the people to know the height and the depth of the love of Christ as manifested in the great sacraments of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist.

As a layman, Philip began to preach the Gospel with a simplicity and a sweetness such as went with Christ's own words; the same qualities marked his preaching as a priest. Detachment from the world, the beauty of virtue, the happiness of the good were his favorite subjects. Imperceptibly his discourses administered a powerful antidote to the contemporary evils of society. His ministry was a burning centre radiating charity and fervor through all grades of Roman society, growing in intensity every year, and bearing almost incredible fruit.

Readers will recall how an illustrious son of St. Philip describes the peace and calm which flooded the soul of a convert on the day of his reception into the Church, how he seemed like a ship that, after long battling with the storms, had come to anchor in a tranquil harbor. The first year of Philip's priesthood was a period of great peace. But after its calm there came the storm. The heart of man is an inscrutable abyss; and now there were not wanting those to whom Philip's very goodness and winningness became an offence and a stumbling block. A certain Vincenzo Tecessi and

two ex-religious began to spread evil reports about the Saint. All the mean resources of small minds were exhausted in their efforts to persecute him, and to impede him in his work. For two years this petty persecution went on. Philip bore it in patience, embracing it as a cross and welcoming the humiliation it entailed. No complaint escaped his lips, nor did he pray to be delivered from the trial from which he came forth with the added glory of perfect self-conquest.

Interior temptations beset him about this time with such fury, that he seemed to see the hosts of hell around him even on the altar. Nor were exterior attacks on his virtue spared him. By the way of arduous conflicts and glorious victories the virtue of purity, which had been conspicuous in his life as a layman, reached a degree almost angelic in his priesthood. 'His virginal candor,' says Bacci, 'shone in his countenance, particularly in his eyes, which even to the end of his life remained so clear and resplendent that no artist ever succeeded in portraying them.'

In 1555, Paul IV. succeeded the short-lived Marcellus II. on the Throne of Peter. In his first pronouncement he proclaimed himself a reformer: 'We promise and swear to do all in our power to bring about the reformation of the Universal Church and of the Court of Rome.' The same year saw an enlargement in Philip's field of action. The rooms at San Girolamo were now too small to hold his disciples who surrounded him as a family around a beloved father. They formed a sort of school in which all the scholars were penetrated with the spirit of the teacher, and all bound together by ties of strong love. In their lives they reflected the simple piety of the Apostles. Rich and poor, noble and plebeian, united in one grand Christian brotherhood, met on equal terms as followers of St. Philip. His fire warmed them; and each in his turn became a force for good in the Eternal City. Now they began to go about the city together, and to hold reunions in some of the larger churches, especially in the Minerva, dear to Philip on account of his old associations with the Dominicans of San Marco. In this way the good work being done became more and more manifest, and the number of disciples increased wonderfully. For a time he cherished the idea of going abroad and following in the footsteps of Francis Xavier, whose glorious death had just crowned a life of marvellous zeal. In his rooms he used to read the letters of St. Francis for his spiritual children, and gradually the desire to imitate the Apostle of the Indies became a fixed resolution. After long deliberation and fervent prayer he sought the advice of Augustine Ghetтини, a Cistercian monk, renowned for learning and sanctity. Ghetтини's answer was: 'Your Indies are in Rome.' The simple words were full of light for Philip. He recognised that his work was at the centre of Christianity; that his mission was to sow there seeds of virtue and sanctity which would bear harvest throughout the entire Catholic world.

He now obtained permission to build over the nave of San Girolamo, a little church which he called 'The Oratory.' There, dating from the year 1558, his disciples—Tarugi, Modio, Barenus, Bordini, and Fucci—began under his guidance to preach, though laymen. The virtues, the lives of the saints, the history of the Church gave them material for their discourses, which were modelled on the same simple lines as his own. Every evening they met at the Oratory, and soon to prayer and preaching they added mortification. Philip always put spiritual mortification first: for him corporal severity served merely as a means to maintain the supremacy of the will, and to keep the rebellious senses in order. I think the keynote of his ascetic school was the insistence of the importance of interior spirituality. His saying, that piety can be covered with three fingers, meant that its seal is in the brain: a right intention and a will schooled to absolute obedience.

Priests and laymen met at the Oratory, and there learned to serve God in gladness. A mutual love held them together under Philip's paternal direction. While Protestantism was striving to bring about the separation of priests and laity, Philip was welding them together

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