NEWMAN AND THE ORATORY

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Newman's choice of the Oratory of St Philip Neri

Having become a Catholic, and desirous of serving his new Church as a priest, Newman was confronted with the question of *which* form of priestly life would best suit his particular talents and those of the disciples who had grouped themselves around him during his years at Littlemore; for he wished at all costs to maintain intact this band of disciples. The issue was complicated by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church was an international institution of which the English-speaking world was then but a tiny part. Hardly anyone in Rome spoke English, and England was, and was to remain until the early years of the 20th century, a 'missionary country' under the direct authority of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith ('Propaganda'). Newman was particularly sensitive to this 'missionary' situation: if he rejected the idea of becoming a simple diocesan priest, it was in part because he considered (quoting the views of Dominic Barberi who had received him into the Catholic Church) that such 'priests were for keeping up a system' but that 'an order was the only thing for converting a country' (*LD* xi. 30).

From the start, Newman's interest in the Oratory went hand in hand with his deep attraction to the figure of St Philip Neri, founder of the first Oratory in Rome in 1575. Indeed, after his two 'conversions' of 1816 and 1845, his discovery of St Philip, whom he would adopt as his patron saint and model, was the third most important event in his spiritual life. It was Bishop Nicholas Wiseman, then Apostolic Administrator of the Central District and, as such, responsible for both Oxford and Birmingham, who first suggested to Newman the idea of the Oratory. (In 1847 Wiseman was transferred to the London district and, when the full Catholic hierarchy was re-established in 1850, was appointed Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. However he continued to act as patron and protector of the 'converts'.) Wiseman also clearly spoke to Newman at some length about St Philip Neri: in the Preface to his first volume of Catholic sermons, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (1849), dedicated to Wiseman, Newman pointed out that this was his first book 'as a Father of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri' and spoke of his debt to Wiseman regarding St Philip, 'of whom I had so often heard you speak before I left England [for Rome], and whose bright and beautiful character had won my devotion, even when I was a Protestant' (*Mix*. v-vi).

In September 1846 Newman and one of his oldest companions from Littlemore, Ambrose St John, were sent by Wiseman to Rome in order to 'complete' their theological studies at the Roman College, the seminary run by Propaganda for the service of 'missionary' countries. Newman found the lectures so elementary, and so boring, that (according to St John) he often fell asleep during them (*LD* xi. 298). He spent much of his time, however, reflecting on his future, this reflection passing through several stages and embracing several hypotheses. He briefly thought of founding a 'school of theology' the aim of which would be the formation of 'missionary' priests for England (*LD* xi. 196); however, the novelty of certain of the ideas expressed in his *Essay on Development*, which had given rise to suspicions regarding his orthodoxy in Rome and elsewhere, caused him to abandon this idea (see chapter on Development). He then thought briefly of founding a new congregation to be called the 'Congregation of the Most Holy Trinity', placed under the patronage of the Virgin Mary and devoted to an intellectual and apologetic apostolate, and in June 1846 drew up a

brief memorandum to this effect (*NO* 149-50). A third stage in his thinking involved the idea of joining one of the existing religious orders (cf. the *Memorandum* of 1878, *NO* 391). He briefly considered the Redemptorists and the Vincentians, but rejected them both for different reasons (the former too exclusively involved in 'rural' missions, the second too unintellectual) before looking more seriously at the Dominicans and the Jesuits. But his contacts with the Dominicans in Italy disappointed him (he learned that those of Florence were renowned as makers of perfumes!), he did not yet know of the renewal of the order in France by Lacordaire, and he concluded rather hastily that the Order of Preachers was 'a great idea extinct' (*LD* xi. 195). The Jesuits were the object of more lengthy consideration. Newman saw in them 'a really hardworking, self-sacrificing body of men' and respected them 'exceedingly', but found them to be far too 'conservative', desirous merely of maintaining the 'traditions' of their 'fathers' and displaying 'a deep suspicion of *change* with a perfect incapacity to create anything *positive* for the wants of the times' (*LD* xii. 103-4). He also feared the spirit of 'submission' which he saw in the Society, declaring that if he were a Jesuit 'no one would know that I was speaking my own words: or was a *continuation*, as it were, of my former self' (*LD* xi. 306).

He then returned to Wiseman's suggestion that he and his companions should become Oratorians, though the idea had never completely left his mind. In December 1846 he and Ambrose St John visited the Roman Oratory which he found 'the most beautiful thing of the kind we have seen in Rome'; he was particularly impressed by the library and the personal apartments, adding that it was 'like a College with hardly any rule' (*LD* xi. 305). In January 1847 he began a novena in order to determine whether his 'vocation' was really to the Oratory. Shortly afterwards the choice was made. Three factors seem to have determined it: his attraction to the person of St Philip; his own situation as a former fellow of an Oxford college and as the leader of a group of fellow-converts, which called for a form of community life; and the 'missionary' situation of England in the mid-nineteenth century.

Newman was ordained a Catholic priest on 30 May 1847. In June he left the College of Propaganda and began an Oratorian noviciate, together with Ambrose St John and several other former members of his Littlemore community (then living, at Wiseman's initiative, at Oscott College a short distance from Birmingham) who had travelled to join them. The noviciate was under the direction of Fr Rossi of the Roman Oratory; it did *not* however (contrary to regulations) take place at the Oratory but in the Cistercian abbey of Santa Croce on the outskirts of Rome. It was remarkable for its brevity – only five months in place of the (now) statutory three years – and for its absence of content – the novices only rarely saw their novice master. Newman's later recollections of it were as terribly 'dreary' (*AW* 256); the activities of the noviciate consisted mainly in 'room-sweeping, slop-emptying, dinner-serving, bed making, shoe blacking' (*LD* xii. 97). He used much of his abundant free time to write his first novel, *Loss and Gain*, published in 1848. However, he profited also from that free time to document himself thoroughly on St Philip and on the history of the Oratory, reading everything then available (all in Latin and Italian) on the two subjects. The fruits of this reading and research are abundantly clear in the numerous chapter addresses which he gave to the members of his newly founded Oratory, particularly during the year 1848. Although he never later succeeded, for lack of time, in writing the history of St Philip and of his Oratory, he did produce a number of lengthy and valuable sketches of both.

Newman and St Philip Neri

There are in fact two Oratories, that founded in 1575 in Rome by St Philip Neri and that founded in 1611 in France by the future Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (to which the author

of this chapter belongs). Newman's choice of Philip's Oratory was so bound up with his attraction to the person of Philip, that a few remarks are indispensable (for more, see Beaumont 2010).

Philip is one of the most attractive figures in the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century. Born in Florence in 1515, where as a boy he was much influenced by the Dominicans and venerated the memory of their great reformer, Savonarola, who had died at the stake in 1498, he spent roughly sixty years of his life in Rome from around 1535 to his death in 1595. Strongly drawn to a life of solitude and contemplative prayer, and probably having come, before his arrival in Rome, under the influence of Benedictine monks from the celebrated Abbey of Monte Cassino, he lived for some ten years virtually as an urban hermit. He then devoted himself to a range of charitable activities (visiting the sick in hospitals, caring for pilgrims who arrived in Rome in increasing numbers and frequently in a state of physical and spiritual exhaustion) and to a work of evangelization which was aided by his easy contact with others, his warm and lively personality and his keen sense of humour (which often expressed itself in practical jokes). From modest beginnings, this reached out to an increasingly large number of inhabitants of Rome and even beyond, for his fame spread throughout Italy and even to other countries of Europe. He was ordained a priest at the (for the time) extremely advanced age of 36, his humility having, it seems, prevented him from previously seeking ordination. An informal group of disciples gradually gathered around him, for whom Philip instituted a series of 'spiritual exercises' (the term is a generic one, then widely used) in a church in Rome: a time of silent prayer, of Bible-reading, of preaching on the Bible or on the life of a saint, of music and singing, finishing once more with silent prayer. The room in which all this took place was called the *oratorio* (from the Latin *orare*, to pray) and the name quickly became transferred to the exercises themselves. In Philip's own eyes, this *oratorio* was his life's work: he had no other ambition than to serve this prayer group which had formed around his person. In 1575, however, Pope Gregory XIII – a close friend of Philip's – obliged him to give to this informal community a canonical status, thus creating the 'Congregation of the Oratory'. However Philip categorically *refused* to allow its members to take vows: the Oratorians were to live in community, like the members of a religious order or congregation, but the sole link between them was to be that of fraternal charity, and each was able to keep his own property and to leave the congregation when he wished. Philip died in 1595 mourned by the population of Rome and venerated as a saint, receiving the title of 'Apostle of Rome'. When he was eventually canonized in 1622, along with Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila and Isidore the Farm-servant (patron saint of Madrid), the people of Rome declared that the Church had that day canonized 'four Spaniards and a saint'!

What could Newman possibly have had in common with such a figure? On the surface, everything seems to separate the joyful and even eccentric sixteenth-century Florentine and the seemingly austere and intellectual nineteenth-century Englishman. But we must look beneath the surface: in reality the two men had *many* things in common, as Newman's many observations on Philip make clear. More recent, extremely detailed studies of Philip, in Italian and in French, confirm moreover the accuracy of Newman's portrayal of his sixteenth-century predecessor.

Both men were conscious reformers of their respective churches (Newman most particularly as an Anglican of course; but he strove also to broaden the intellectual horizons of the Catholic Church). Both sought to bring about this reform through a return to the beginnings of Christianity, in the Bible, the work of the Church Fathers and the life of the early monks. Philip encouraged his disciple Cesare Baronio (1538-1607) to embark on a study of the history of the early church, resulting in the publication between 1588 and 1593, in 12

folio volumes, of his erudite and authoritative *Annales Ecclesiastici*, upon which Newman's own patristic studies drew. According to Newman, Philip wished to

> bring back all who [would] listen to him to primitive times, not by undoing what the Church had grown into, but by cultivating those inward tempers and moulding that special character to which in the Apostolic age such especial and prominent attention was given and to which in the event those latter decrees and ordinances are attributable. (*NO* 203)

Spiritually, both men had about them something of the monk, yet one who carried his monastery deep down within him while living in the 'world'. Newman saw moreover one of the major sources of inspiration of Philip's Oratory in the mode of life of those early (coenobitic) monks 'of which St. Benedict is the typical representative'. These early monks

> lived in communities, which were detached from each other, not brought together under one common governance; they were settled in one place, and had no duties beyond it; vows were not a necessary element of their state; … they were simple in their forms of worship, and they freely admitted laymen into their fellowship. In peculiarities such as these we recognize the Oratory of St. Philip. (*OS* 225)

Both men combined moreover a contemplative trait with a deep pastoral concern. Philip worked amongst the poor and the sick; as for Newman, there is a deep continuity between the work of the young deacon of St Clement's, one of the poorest parishes in Oxford, visiting *all* his parishioners with particular attention paid to the poor and the sick, and the elderly Oratorian coming to the aid, financially and in other ways, of the poor Irish families living in the vicinity of the Oratory in Edgbaston. And both Philip and Newman exercised this charitable action with such discretion, not to say secretiveness, that their Oratorian brethren were astonished to discover, on the death of each, its full extent.

Newman was attracted also to the deep joy which Philip radiated (four years before the latter's death, Cardinal Valier published a short work on him entitled *The Dialogue of Christian Joy*), seeing in him 'one of the most cheerful, equable, peaceful spirits that has ever been given to the Church' and expressing the hope that 'we shall be his good children' (*LD* xii. 68). The founder of the English Oratory wished to have in his own institute 'companions who have a good deal of fun in them – for that will be especially wanted in an Oratory', adding that '[i]f we do not have spirit, it will be like bottled beer with the cork out' (*LD* xii. 54-5) and writing to Dominic Barberi that 'we must manage to be cheerful in order to convert young persons' (*LD* xii. 62). At the same time, he was fully aware of the origin of the deep joy which people sensed in Philip, who was 'great simply in the attraction with which a Divine Power had gifted him' (*Idea* 201).

A further trait shared by both Newman and Philip was, in the former's eyes, a positive attitude towards all forms of culture. In his sermon 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri' his love of typologies causes him to sketch parallel portraits of Philip and his Florentine compatriot, the great Dominican reformer Savonarola, who had attempted between 1494 and 1498 to reform the moral and religious life of his fellow-citizens by violence, both verbal and physical: twice he organized an enormous bonfire in the centre of Florence on which the population was invited to throw profane works of art, literature, jewellery, fashionable clothes and other secular objects, the whole then being consumed by the flames (*OS* 199-242). Philip was as passionate a reformer as Savonarola, yet sought to achieve his aims by diametrically opposite means. According to Newman, he

> preferred to yield to the stream, and direct the current, which he could not stop, of science, literature, art, and fashion, and to sweeten and to sanctity what God had made very good and man had spoilt. (*Idea* 200)

Both men (despite the presence in some of Newman's sermons of a generalized condemnation of 'the world') subscribe, in their view of the relationship between nature and grace, to the view expressed in the traditional adage *gratia perfecit naturam* – grace does not replace nature but, by penetrating it and transforming it from within, brings it to perfection. In a chapter address Newman exhorts his fellow-Oratorians to aim 'at being something more' – more, and not other – 'than mere University men, such as we all have been. Let grace perfect nature, and let us, as Catholics, not indeed cease to be what we were, but exalt what we were into something which we were not' (*NO* 221). This view is forcefully expressed also in his two Dublin sermons devoted to the Apostle Paul, 'St. Paul's Characteristic Gift' and 'St. Paul's Gift of Sympathy', both of which are also in part (the one explicitly, the other implicitly) portraits of St Philip (and doubtless, too, unconscious portraits of the author himself). In the former of the two, he declares that men such as Paul (and, by association, Philip)

> have the thoughts, feelings, frames of mind, attractions, sympathies, antipathies of other men, so far as these are not sinful, only they have these properties of human nature purified, sanctified and exalted; and they are only made more eloquent, more poetical, more profound, more intellectual, by reason of their being more holy. (*OS* 93)

The two men share also a deep human sympathy with regard to other men. Philip had about him a simplicity and natural charm which enabled him to enter into contact easily with the simple and ignorant, but at the same time (while liking to pretend to be ignorant!) possessed a knowledge and culture which enabled him to converse with the most highly educated. Newman (quoting Pietro Bacci, who was himself quoting 1 Cor 9:22) describes him in the conclusion to Discourse IX of *The Idea of a University* in the following terms:

> In the words of his biographer, 'he was all things to all men. He suited himself to noble and ignoble, young and old, subjects and prelates, learned and ignorant; and received those who were strangers to him with singular benignity, and embraced them with as much love and charity as if he had been a long while expecting them. … He gave the same welcome to all: caressing the poor equally with the rich, and wearying himself to assist all to the utmost limits of his power. … Nay, people came to him, not only from all parts of Italy, but from France, Spain, Germany, and all Christendom; and even the infidels and Jews, who had ever any communication with him, revered him as a holy man.' (*Idea* 200-201).

Lastly, Newman holds up the deep humility of St Philip as an example, which he himself strove to emulate. The conclusion to 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri' declares him to be his followers' 'true model, – the humble priest, shrinking from every kind of dignity, or post, or office, and living the greater part of day and night in prayer, in his room or upon the housetop' (*OS* 240). Newman continues:

> May this spirit ever rule us more and more! For me, my dear Fathers of the Oratory, did you ask me, and were I able, to gain some boon for you from St. Philip … I would beg for you this privilege, that the public world might never know you for praise or for

> blame, that you should do a good deal of hard work in your generation, and prosecute many useful labours, and effect a number of religious purposes, and send many souls to heaven, and take men by surprise, how much you were really doing, when they happened to come near enough to see it; but that by the world you should be overlooked, that you should not be known out of your place, that you should work for God alone with a pure heart and single eye, without the distractions of human applause, and should make Him your sole hope, and His eternal heaven your sole aim, and have your reward, not partly here, but fully and entirely hereafter. (*OS* 241-2)

St Philip was, for Newman, both a model and a source of spiritual strength. In the concluding paragraph of *The Idea of a University* he declares that, as regards himself, 'whether or not I can do any thing at all in St. Philip's way, at least I can do nothing in any other' (*Idea* 202). And four years later, in a chapter address to his fellow-Oratorians, he states: 'As Christians, we have given ourselves to Christ; to make this more sure and definite, we have, as Oratorians, given ourselves to St Philip' (*NO* 327-8).

Newman's 'idea' of the Oratory

Just as Newman speaks in the *Essay on Development* of the 'idea' of Christianity, in his Dublin lectures of 1852 of the 'idea' of a university, and elsewhere of the Benedictine 'idea' (for example, *HS* ii. 446, 453), so too does he possess an 'idea' of the Oratory. This is based broadly on the nature of the institute created by St Philip Neri. However, Newman was well aware of the differences between the latter's context and nineteenth-century England with its rapidly industrializing, increasingly urbanized society, in which Catholicism had for so long been the religion of a despised and persecuted minority. As a result, he had asked Pope Pius IX for certain modifications of the Oratorian Rule in order to 'adapt' it to the context of England. It was not a question therefore of slavishly imitating a model going back to the sixteenth century but of seeking to determine the nature and characteristics of the 'idea' which inspired St Philip. Newman's correspondence, and even more so his chapter addresses to his fellow-Oratorians given over a period of thirty years between 1848 and 1878, enable us to delineate the chief characteristics of that idea.

The first of these is its resemblance to an Oxford college. This is expressed, with a certain wry humour, in one of his earliest chapter addresses in January or February 1848:

> Now I will say in a word what is the nearest approximation in fact to an Oratorian Congregation that I know, and that is, one of the Colleges in the Anglican Universities. Take such a College, destroy the Head's house, annihilate wife and children and restore him to the body of fellows, change the religion from Protestant to Catholic, and give the Head and Fellows missionary and pastoral work, and you have a Congregation of St Philip before your eyes. (*NO* 191)

In Oxford colleges at the time all the fellows (but not the head) were by obligation unmarried clerics and if a man wished to marry he had to resign his fellowship. In a rather more serious vein, the second characteristic was the Oratory's part in a *tradition* going back to the early centuries of the church. In 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri', Newman quotes with approval a passage from Baronio's *Annals* in which the author, carried away by his enthusiasm, suddenly leaps into the present to describe St Philip's *oratorio* which he likens to the 'Apostolical assembly':

> ‘It was arranged, that almost every day those who were desirous of Christian perfection should come to the Oratory. First, there was some length of time spent in mental prayer, then one of the brothers read a spiritual book, and during the reading the aforesaid Father commented on what was read. Sometimes he desired one of the brethren to give his opinion on some subject, and then the discourse proceeded in the form of dialogue. After this, he commanded one of them to mount a seat, and there, in a familiar, plain style, to discourse upon the lives of the Saints. To him succeeded another, on a different subject, but equally plain; lastly, a third discoursed upon ecclesiastical history. When all was finished, they sang some spiritual hymn, prayed again for a short time, and so ended. Things being thus disposed, and approved by the Pope’s authority, it seemed as though the beautiful form of the Apostolical assembly had returned, as far as times admitted.’ (*OS* 225-6)

A third characteristic was the flexible nature of the institution. The Oratory was ‘a most versatile, elastic, institution’ and could ‘take any kind of work’ (*LD* xviii. 166). This enabled it also to honour and to develop the diversity of talents of its members. In a memorandum of 1848 he recalls that ‘whereas the tastes of all of us were very different, the Oratory allowed greater scope for them than any other Institution; again it seemed more adapted than any other for Oxford and Cambridge men’ (*NO* 437). The Oratory had always been ‘on the whole a learned institution’ and had been made up ‘in great measure, of highly educated men’ (*NO* 197). In a letter of July 1847 he states that ‘the object of St Philip’ had been ‘to educate a higher class of priests for parish work – most of his followers were highly educated men, corresponding precisely to the fellows of our English universities’; thus the Oratory seemed ‘the proper thing for England at this moment’, for one found ‘abundance of piety and zeal in the English priests at the moment, but they want education’ (*LD* xii. 101). Moreover, ‘it continues to be the case ’, he states elsewhere, that ‘we are, and apparently we shall be, better educated than the run of secular priests’ (*NO* 218). The Oratory made it possible to unite intellectual and pastoral activities, and it would give him personally both ‘active work’ and ‘time for reading and writing’ (*LD* xii. 45). ‘Oratorianism’ also combined ‘external secularism’ with a ‘gentle inward bond of asceticism’ (*LD* xi. 263). In the ‘missionary’ context of England these were all valuable assets. Finally, Newman wished the Oratory to be able to direct its attention both to the educated élite and to the merchant classes and labouring masses of the expanding industrial towns and cities (the Birmingham Oratory would in fact undertake responsibility, amongst other things, for the city’s workhouse and prison).

A fourth feature of the Oratory which greatly appealed to Newman was its small scale and its ‘homely’ character. He emphasizes that the community must be the ‘home’ of the Oratorian. Reflecting on this, he adds:

> The Italians, I believe, have no word for home – nor is it an idea which readily enters into the mind of a foreigner, at least not so readily as into the mind of an Englishman. It is remarkable then that the Oratorian Fathers should have gone out of their way to express the idea by the metaphorical word *nido* or nest, which is used by them almost technically. (*NO* 192)

For this reason, Newman explains, an Oratory must be small in size. ‘I have never wished’, he states, ‘I have never liked, a large Oratory. Twelve working Priests has been the limit of my ambition. One cannot love many at one time; one cannot really have many friends. An Oratory is a family and a home; a domestic circle, as the words imply, is bounded and rounded’ (*NO* 387).

He emphasizes also the 'accidental' circumstances of the foundation of the Oratory, the relatively indeterminate character of its historical development, and the 'lightness' of its Rule. Philip had never intended to found a congregation: a community of disciples had gathered spontaneously around him. When obliged by the Pope to give a canonical status to this community, he had provided it with a very simple 'Rule', containing only a small number of actual prescriptions. Philip, while insisting on its 'strict observance', 'grounded that observance on his rules being so few; indeed, they are hardly more than is necessary for barely keeping the community together'. This Rule was developed and added to by his successors, with the result that 'the Oratorian Rule … is not, for the most part, the Rule of St Philip, but it is the successive decrees of the Congregation for the first 30 or 40 years of its existence, put together, illustrated by its customs, and ratified by the Pope'; thus, 'as a matter of history the Congregation is not built on the rule, but the rule is the creation of the Congregation'. Even so, he adds, 'the rule itself is so light and general that in one sense the Oratorian is without an external rule for his conduct' (*NO* 204-5). Newman also notes with approval that each community (or 'congregation') is self-governing and autonomous, all important decisions being taken collectively by all those Fathers having spent a statutory qualifying period in the community.

He dwells in particular on the absence of 'vows' which originally set the Oratory apart in the history of the church: it was the first ever congregation to be allowed to dispense with religious vows. Philip was implacably hostile to such vows in the case of his own congregation (which did not prevent him from sending hundreds of new recruits to the Dominicans, the Jesuits and other orders and congregations, all of which imposed vows). The fact of 'chastity' can be regarded as being understood. As to 'poverty', however, each Oratorian is able to keep his own property – Newman admitted that this fact had played a part in his own choice of the Oratory, adding (with a touch of wry humour, no doubt in reference to his library) that he felt 'the notion of giving up property [would] try [his] faith very much' (*LD* xi. 306). Nor is there any promise of 'obedience', though there does exist an implicit notion of stability (the object of one of the promises made by Benedictine monks) – an Oratorian enters a particular community with the intention, in principle, of remaining there all his life. Nonetheless, he is entitled to leave the congregation as and when he wishes.

Newman's views on vows may cause surprise by their apparent rigidity – he seems to see in them *only* the aspect of constraint, and to have considered the strict observance of vows as the proper means for religious to achieve 'sanctity'. This must be seen however in the context of the time: there was in fact a marked hardening in the way of understanding the nature and the function of religious vows in the nineteenth century, with a concentration on the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, whereas in the early seventeenth century the founder of the French Oratory, Bérulle, could conceive of his Oratorians taking a 'vow of obedience to the bishop' (a measure resolutely refused by Rome!) and a 'vow not to seek and not to accept benefices' (Dupuy 260).

At times this emphasis on the absence of vows leads Newman to formulate a very 'minimalist' definition of the Oratory, for example in this extract from his *Remarks on the Oratorian Vocation* of August 1856, a document printed but intended for internal circulation only:

> The Congregation of the Oratory, then, is a community of secular priests, living together without vows, for the fulfilment of their ministry, under a rule and with privileges given them by the Holy See. First, its members are 'secular priests;' secondly, 'living in community.' The Oratory is this and nothing more or less than this…. (*NO* 314)

He goes on, however, to qualify this blunt statement by seeking to 'draw out' some of the 'various characteristics' which the Oratory possesses. He emphasizes time and again the fact that St Philip's rejection of vows was part of a broader conception according to which it was necessary to pass from the imposition of *external* rules and constraints to an 'internalisation' of these. The following passage is characteristic:

> St Philip then formed a community, yet without vows and almost without rules; and he aimed at doing this, as I have said, by forming in his disciples a certain character instead…. It was St Philip's object therefore, instead of imposing laws on his disciples, to mould them, as far as might be into living laws, or, in the words of Scripture, to write the law on their hearts. (*NO* 205-6)

His love of typologies leads him to contrast the Jesuit and the Oratorian: in an Oratorian community, contrary to a Jesuit one, every member

> seems to be acting at his own discretion – he acts from himself – the laws on which the community moves are not external but within – it is selfmoved. As is commonly observed the Superior is never to say 'I command', but always 'I wish;' and it is recorded even of St Philip that he never used the words 'I command' but once. It is the common sense, the delicacy, the sharp observation, the tact of each which keeps the whole in harmony. It is a living principle, call it (in human language) judgment or wisdom or discretion or sense of propriety or moral perception, which takes the place of formal enactment… (*NO* 208)

He adds that, as compared with Oratorians, 'Jesuit Fathers are part of a whole, but each Oratorian stands by himself and is a whole, promoting and effecting by his own proper acts the wellbeing of the community' (*NO* 210).

As a result of this 'internalization', the Oratory constitutes 'in one sense' a 'religion' (that is, a religious order or congregation):

> From all this I conclude that St Philip's wish and aim was, that his Congregation should be in one sense a religion, i.e. *taking away* externals, vows, rule, poverty, bodily mortifications and the like;– that is, it was to have the internal perfection of a religion, whatever that may be said to consist in. (*NO* 399)

Oratorians, like religious, are also called upon to seek 'perfection'. But whereas, according to Newman, the 'perfection' sought by religious lies in their conformity to the prescriptions of their 'rule' (a very nineteenth-century view), he defines that for which the Oratorian must strive as mainly consisting 'in the performance of our duties, and in the precepts of the New Law, in a life of faith, hope and charity according to the calls of every day and every occupation. He is perfect, in substance, who does the duties of the day perfectly' (*NO* 300).

In both Philip's and Newman's conception of the Oratory, 'rules' and 'vows' were to be replaced simply by 'Christian love' and 'fraternal charity': 'St Philip, we know, founded his Congregation in charity – making it the distinguishing mark by which his children were different from regulars [i.e. followers of a *regula* or rule]…. Love was to stand in the place of vows' (*NO* 222). Newman freely admits that such an enterprise 'was a far more difficult and delicate work…. It might be objected that it was impossible for any set of men, left to themselves, without vows or stringent rules, to fulfil so high a calling'. Philip in fact achieved what 'the Holy Patriarchs of the Regulars, St Benedict, St Dominic, St Francis, St Ignatius' and others had striven also to achieve yet had 'felt to be beyond them'. It was only possible in

the kind of conditions which existed 'in primitive times' and 'in separate communities', those of the early monks, 'which St Philip revived, or rather reformed' (*NO* 206-7).

Newman in no way hides the difficulty of maintaining this Oratorian ideal. In a chapter address of 1858, looking back on ten years of Oratorian life, he recognizes that the 'absence of vows' leaves the 'Oratorian body' in an 'unarmed, weaponless state'. It 'involves the necessity of our *all* being one in spirit'; it is 'a call on every one of us', as 'a matter of life and death to our body', to 'cherish a personal affection for [each] other, and to show each other all kind, attentive, and humble service'; and in the fulfilment of this 'great duty' the 'difference between Superior and subjects, young and old, simply vanishes' (*NO* 375). Looking back on thirty years, in 1878, he declared that 'we ought…, as far as possible, to have one sentiment, one interest; we have, as far as possible, to suppress all serious conflict of opinion; we should be slow to introduce our own notions'. We should, he remarks, 'in all Congregational matters strive to move as one mind; avoid, if possible, to avoid going by majorities'; we should also 'be tender of the Fathers who form a minority'; however, he adds astutely, 'on the other hand single Fathers should not inconsiderately take advantage of the tenderness exercised towards them' (*NO* 387).

It is the *community* which must take precedence over the will of the individual. In January 1851, Newman was obliged to perform the painful duty of expelling from the Oratory one of its members, William Penny, who, 'in spite of his unusual gifts and most exemplary correctness of moral deportment, and high aspirations after sanctity', had displayed a total 'indifference to community life'. He recalled that it was 'the traditionary maxim of the Oratory that "chi vuol vivere al suo modo non è buono per la Congregazione" ['He who wishes to live according to his own fancy is not a suitable member of the community'] and that all things must be subservient to "santa communità"' (*LD* xiv. 500). And in his *Remarks on the Oratorian Vocation* of 1856, he recalled 'a great counsel, carrying with it a great sanctification, according to the maxim, which has almost become a proverb in the Oratory: "Vita communis, mortificatio maxima"' (*NO* 334).

Finally, Newman argues that the Oratorian's very 'person' does not 'belong to himself' but to the community:

> Our property, whatever it is, is our own, and there may be duties upon it external to the Congregation. But our persons, if I may so speak, are not our own – our time, our thought, our trouble, our abilities, are not our own. … no one is to exhaust what he has of learning or resources on his own name, or should seek the aggrandizement of his own name, but should freely give to others, be willing for others to have the credit, of his own labour, knowledge or ability. (*NO* 224-5)

He recognizes the extreme difficulty of living up to this ideal, but also suggests a way of advancing towards it. The 'most heavenly temper of mind' which is the 'special foundation' of the Oratory (*NO* 226) can only be obtained and maintained by 'supernatural' means, that is to say by constant prayer. Prayer must be a central and an essential part of the daily life of the Oratorian if he is to live up to his vocation. An extract from a prayer by Newman is eloquent in this respect:

> O my God, leave me not in that dry state in which I am; give me the comfort of Thy grace. How can I have any tenderness or sweetness, unless I have Thee to look upon? how can I continue in prayer, as is my duty doubly, since I belong to the Oratory, unless Thou encourage me and make it pleasant to me? (*MD* 320)

The historical development of the Oratory in England

At the end of November 1847 Newman received from Pope Pius IX the Papal Brief authorizing him to found the Oratory of St Philip Neri in England and allowing a number of modifications to the rule in order to adapt it to English conditions. The Brief appointed him Superior of the Oratory in England and stipulated that the place of foundation should be Birmingham. Newman himself would have preferred London, as being the intellectual and cultural centre of the country, but Birmingham was chosen because that was where Wiseman had been Administrator before his move to London. The document as a whole displayed an almost total ignorance of the political, social and cultural realities of England. Only those parts of the rule concerning the absence of vows and the importance of community life were esteemed obligatory. Newman had requested, and obtained, exceptionally, permission to open a school if and when the financial circumstances of the community made it possible. However, it contained also a stipulation that Newman had not asked for, and to which Faber would later appeal: the Oratory was to address itself to the *splendidior, doctior et honestior ordo* of England, in short the wealthy and educated classes.

Newman and his companions left Rome for England in late November and December, Newman and St John arriving in London on Christmas Eve. On 1 February 1848 the Congregation of the Oratory was canonically erected at Maryvale (the renamed old Oscott College). On that occasion Newman admitted to the newly founded Oratory nine members – five recently ordained priests, one novice and three lay brothers. On 14 February the numbers of the community were more than doubled with the arrival – at the request of Wiseman, but contrary to the wishes of Newman – of Frederick William Faber (who had been received into the Catholic Church only a few weeks after Newman) and his band of young disciples who had taken the name of 'Brothers of the Will of God'. (They were also known as 'Wilfridians', having been responsible, under the patronage of the Earl of Shrewsbury, for the parish of St Wilfrid's in nearby Shropshire; Faber himself took the name of 'Fr Wilfrid', Newman writing to him under this name.) Faber failed to reveal to Newman at the outset the extent of his commitments, including financial obligations, towards the Earl of Shrewsbury which would lead to endless complications over the next two years. Newman had already expressed reservations concerning his character: he had been shocked by a pamphlet containing a violent attack on Anglo-Catholics, which he saw as likely to turn away from the Catholic Church men like Keble and Pusey. Faber was to continue in a similar vein.

However, Wiseman and the rest of Newman's original community were in favour of a merger between the two groups, and with increased numbers Newman began to think of the creation of other Oratories. He had already suggested to Wiseman in February 1847 that the Birmingham Oratory might become a sort of 'mother house' combining a common noviciate, a retreat centre, and a rest house for all its members (rather along the lines of the French Oratory founded by Bérulle). It was in any case necessary to leave Maryvale, the rural situation of which was given up in the autumn of 1848, and in January 1849 Newman and several other Fathers opened a 'mission' in Alcester Street in a down-trodden area in the centre of Birmingham, using as their premises a converted gin-distillery. The mission met with huge success: the Sunday evening services attracted six hundred people, not all of them Catholics; one hundred children were enrolled in catechism classes; evening lectures were given twice a week; and a good many conversions took place. In early 1852, the Oratory would finally move to its definitive premises in Edgbaston where a huge community house had been built.

Faber meanwhile had been arguing, on the basis of the Papal Brief, for the creation of an Oratory in London where alone could be found in sufficient numbers the 'wealthy and educated' classes specified in the Brief. On 13 May 1849 an Oratory was opened in King

William Street in the Strand district, with Newman preaching that evening his sermon on 'Prospects of the Catholic Missioner' (*Mix.* 238-59). Faber was appointed Rector of the London Oratory, Newman remaining Superior of the two houses. The two Oratories were then formally separated in October of that year, with Faber being elected Superior of the London house. In 1853 the London Oratory was transferred to the much wealthier district of Brompton where it remains.

It has to be admitted that Newman's situation was difficult during this period. Irrespective of Faber's harassment, he himself would much have preferred London. But the Papal Brief had stipulated Birmingham and he felt obliged to respect the will of the Pope in the matter. He thus sacrificed to the Pope's wishes (based, it must be said, largely on ignorance) the far greater influence which he would have been able to exercise in London. In the long run, however, he saw the personal advantages of Birmingham. He wrote to Faber in March 1849 that in London he would have 'various work' for which he was 'wellfitted: to preach, lecture, converse etc.' but also 'much semi-religious work, far less suited to me' and 'much merely routine business', whereas in Birmingham his 'day was mainly free', and it was 'just the life' he had 'ever coveted' with 'time for study, yet missionary work of the most intimate kind, confessing, preaching, or catechising' (*LD* xiii. 94-95).

From the beginning relations between Newman and Faber were difficult, and they were to become increasingly strained as the only two Oratorians with the necessary qualities of leadership. While proclaiming his total 'submission' to Newman as founder and superior, Faber quickly displayed a spirit of independence and even insubordination. His extreme emotionalism and Newman's hypersensitivity also combined to make misunderstandings and conflict inevitable. Independently of this clash of personalities, the ideas of the two men diverged radically. Faber argued for the Italian model of a total separation between Oratories whereas Newman (who was perfectly well aware of the Italian model) considered that the 'missionary' situation of England rendered links between them necessary, at least for a time, a conception contemptuously dismissed by Faber and the London Oratorians as 'French'. Faber believed that fidelity to St Philip required as exact an imitation as possible of the *forms* of piety of the 16th century; for Newman it was a question of discerning the original 'idea' of the Oratory and 'developing' it, adapting it to very different circumstances. Despite his profound devotion to St Philip, Newman rejected the exclusivism of Faber and certain of the London Oratorians: he criticized Faber's lectures of May 1850 on *The Spirit and Genius of St. Philip Neri, Founder of the Oratory,* in which St Philip was presented as 'not only the representative Saint, but the instrumental Saint of modern times', and protested against the idea that 'all here ought to be Oratorians' (*LD* xiv. 30). Faber wished to introduce into English Catholicism devotions which Newman considered 'imported' and 'Italian' and to which he much preferred a more resolutely 'English' Catholicism. Faber used hyperbolic language in speaking of saints and their 'miracles' which to Newman's mind could not but offend the susceptibilities of Anglicans: 'We must avoid every thing extreme' was the advice he gave to a future member of the London community (*LD* xii. 197). The same was true of Faber's highly emotional 'devotional' language: for example, he and others in London called the Virgin Mary by the name of 'Mama'. Finally, the two men – and the Catholic community as a whole – were increasingly divided along 'political' lines, Faber's ultramontanism, close to that of Manning, differing radically from Newman's much more moderate and balanced view of the church.

During these years, Newman was not only concerned with the foundation of Oratories. The years 1848-52 were years of intense literary activity during which he published four books. All but the last however were closely bound up, in one way or another, with the Oratory. Between February and October 1849 he preached a series of 18 sermons published that same year as *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*. If the style is somewhat

more rhetorical than that of his Anglican sermons and if certain sermons contain an obviously apologetic intent, others are almost magnificent hymns of praise to the power of divine grace.

In early 1850 the London Oratorians invited him to give a series of Lenten lectures in their church in King William Street. Newman hesitated as to the appropriate content to give to these lectures until the 'Gorham case' clinched the matter: it concerned an Anglican minister who was in open conflict with his Bishop, who had refused to appoint him as parish priest on account of his rejection of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The case passed upwards through the various courts of the land, finally reaching the judicial committee of the Privy Council which ruled in March 1850 that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration did *not* count amongst the essential doctrines of the Church of England. For Catholics and many Anglicans, for such a court to make such a decision constituted proof that the Church of England was not an independent entity but an instrument of the State; it prompted 56 conversions of Anglican clergymen to Catholicism in 1850-54, following on the 40 conversions in 1845-49 triggered by Newman's own conversion (Herring 2016: 49). Newman decided to address himself in his lectures to former sympathizers of what he now called 'the Movement of 1833' in order to persuade them to take what must now seem, he believed, the ultimate logical step. The lectures, given between May and July, were published that same year, 1850, with the title *Lectures on Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Submitting to the Catholic Church* (this title was later slightly modified). As a result of their success, Newman was awarded a papal doctorate: from now on, and up until his being made a Cardinal in 1879, he would be generally called 'Dr Newman'.

A third major work was also the consequence of public events, as well as presenting a link with the Oratory. In September 1850 the Catholic hierarchy was officially restored in England, producing an extraordinary 'Protestant' backlash: there were riots, and denunciations in the press, Parliament and elsewhere of 'Papal aggression'. Newman as a result gave in the Birmingham Corn Exchange in the summer of 1851 a new series of lectures in which he sought to fathom the underlying (and often unconscious) roots of English anti-Catholicism. Published under the title *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, it is one of his most brilliant satirical works. The title page stated that the lectures were 'Addressed to the Brothers of the Oratory'. His denunciation in these lectures of the alleged crimes of an Italian ex-Dominican, Giacinto Achilli, who had fled to England and whose cause had been taken up by the fiercely anti-Catholic Evangelical Alliance, led however to a prosecution for libel. The affair dragged on for over a year and ended with Newman being fined £100. During his protracted stays in London during this period, Newman stayed at the London Oratory where he spent a large part of his days and nights in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament (a practice hitherto unknown, it seems, among English Catholics).

He continued during these years to give regular chapter addresses and lectures to his Oratorian community. On 15 and 18 January 1850, to mark the second anniversary of the foundation of the Oratory, he gave a long two-part sermon on 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri'. He gave talks also to the members of the *Oratorium Parvum* or 'Little Oratory', a confraternity of lay young men who wished to in share Oratorian spirituality, a body which Newman considered 'more important than any thing else' (*LD* xiii. 274).

He also seriously considered the idea of a 'female Oratory', noting that such an institution existed in Naples, attached to the Oratory there (*LD* xvii. 132). Mention of the idea is first found in a letter of July 1849, six months after the installation of the Oratory in Alcester Street, in connection with a plan to create a 'house of refuge for Catholic girls out of place' and a 'general centre of instruction for women', both of which would ideally be run by women who would be 'not nuns, but nunnish ladies' (*LD* xiii. 239). In a draft of his *Remarks on the Oratorian Vocation* of 1856 he speaks warmly of the contribution made by women to

the work of the Oratory: the ‘large sums bestowed on our Oratory’ had come ‘nearly entirely from women’ and ‘[t]he schools, our sick, our poor, our popular music, owe a special debt to the services of women in various ranks of life’. Rome had been petioned for ‘leave to set up a Little Oratory for women’, made up of ‘a large number [of women] of various ages’ who would be called – by analogy with the lay ‘Brothers of the Oratory’ – ‘Sisters of the Oratory’ and who would be particularly valuable in ‘the creation of a hospital’ (*NO* 311). Nothing, however, appears to have come of this project.

In the meantime, in April 1851 the Primate of the Catholic Church in Ireland and future Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen, had asked Newman to give a series of public lectures in Dublin to arouse support for the projected Catholic University of Ireland (of which he was subsequently appointed Rector). Five lectures were given, to which Newman added four other texts written in the form of lectures but never delivered; they were published at the end of 1852 as *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, and were to become in 1873 the first part of *The Idea of a University*. In the last lecture, entitled ‘Duties of the Church Towards Knowledge’, Newman concluded with a resounding panegyric of St Philip Neri and of his Oratory, considered as a model of what should be the Church’s approach to secular culture. (The *Apologia* twelve years later was also to conclude with a ringing tribute by Newman to his patron saint, St Philip, and especially to his fellow-Oratorians.)

The next six or seven years, however, were to be a difficult time for both Newman and his Oratory. He was obliged to divide his time between his duties as founder and Rector of the Catholic University and those as Superior of the Birmingham Oratory, both of which suffered from his long absences. The Oratory went through a number of crises; and Newman also had to manage the difficult situation created by the now open opposition of Faber and the London Oratorians. A protracted dispute (in which Faber seems to have acted with considerable deviousness) led Newman to make a visit to Rome in January 1856 in order, as he wrote to Cardinal Wiseman, to make clear ‘the real state of the difficulty about the Oratory, which will be greater, I am sure, as time goes on’ (*LD* xvii. 103). It also enabled him to visit several northern Italian Oratories. It was the conflict with London which led Newman eventually to put down on paper for the benefit of his Oratorian brethren his important *Remarks on the Oratorian Vocation* (*NO* 313-46).

In 1858 he finally resigned his position as Rector of the Catholic University and returned definitively to Birmingham and to his Oratorian *nido*. Around the same time, friends amongst the lay converts from Anglicanism conceived the idea of a school run by the Oratory. As early as 1849, the poor state of Catholic schools in England had raised in Newman’s mind the idea of starting a school which he saw as a sort of ‘Eton of the Oratory’ (*LD* xiii. 143). One reason for starting a school was ‘to do *things which secular priests cannot do*’ (*LD* xviii. 159). It would be, as a close friend and correspondent, Sir John Simeon, put it, ‘Eton, minus its wickedness, and plus the inculcation of the Catholic faith’. Simeon and his convert friends saw in Newman the person best suited to this task, for as a Catholic he had remained quintessentially English, whereas others seemed determined to ‘denationalize the English Catholic, and to set up as a model for his imitation, some foreign type’ (*LD* xviii. 17 n. 1). The school opened its doors in May 1859. Despite suspicions on the part of the English bishops, who feared the influence of Newman’s supposedly ‘liberal’ ideas on the nation’s Catholic youth, and in Rome, which suspected him of wanting to prepare Catholic students for Oxford, and in spite also of fierce opposition from the six other Catholic establishments and a grave internal crisis in 1861 which led to the dismissal of the headmaster, Darnell, the school survived and eventually thrived. In 1865, six years after its foundation, it had succeeded ‘in making the other schools, even the Jesuit schools, less continental in their ways and more English, as in trusting boys and giving up *espionage*’ (according to Richard Church,

quoted Shrimpton 2005: 244). In the end, the Oratory School would educate a considerable number of men who would make an important contribution to the political, economic and military life of the nation.

Despite the many difficulties encountered in the day-to-day running of the Oratory and in his role of 'Provost' or Superior, Newman worked hard to make of his community a place of true brotherly love and mutual respect. Amongst members of the Oratory, with no-one was the bond of mutual affection stronger than with Ambrose St John, Newman's most devoted disciple and a dear friend of over thirty years standing. Pressure from overwork at the School and elsewhere brought about, in 1875, a nervous breakdown and the premature death of St John at the age of 59. He was buried in the little cemetery attached to the Oratorians' retreat and rest house in Rednal. Fifteen years later, Newman was to be buried, at his request, in the same grave as St John – a tradition going back to the Middle Ages when very close friends often shared the same grave. This fact was used a few years ago in a campaign in favour of homosexual rights which claimed that Newman and St John had been engaged in a homosexual relationship, a claim to which no serious scholar of Victorian culture and linguistic usage could accord the slightest credence. (Curiously, when attempts were made in 2008 to exhume Newman's body in preparation for his beatification two years later, the discovery that *nothing* remained of the body seems to have dealt a death-blow to the campaign.)

One final episode involving Newman's Oratory deserves mention. In 1854 religious tests (which had previously prevented all but Anglicans from studying at Oxford and from graduating at Cambridge) were abolished, and Catholics were free to attend the two Universities. Newman however was concerned at the total lack of spiritual provision for them there. In 1864 he was offered a five-acre plot of land in Oxford, and he immediately conceived the idea of founding an Oratory there. His Bishop, Bernard Ullathorne (with whom his relations were excellent), thereupon offered him the 'mission' to Oxford. However Propaganda, and a majority of the Catholic bishops led by Henry Manning (who was to succeed Wiseman the following year, in 1865) were strongly opposed to Catholics attending the 'Protestant' universities of Oxford and Cambridge for fear of them losing their faith, and Manning succeeded in obtaining from Rome a formal instruction forbidding Catholic parents from sending their sons there. Newman was obliged at the end of the year to sell the land he had bought. A further opportunity presented itself in 1866-7, but again plans were frustrated: Rome now gave permission for Newman to accept the Oxford mission and to found an Oratory there, but it issued secret instructions that he himself was *not* to be allowed to reside in Oxford (cf. *LD* xxiii. 126-7, 129, 130-3, 312). (It was not until after Manning's death in 1892 that the Bishops finally agreed to allow Catholics students to attend Oxford and Cambridge.) One can only speculate on what Newman's influence on the student body might have been had he been able to realize this project.

A re-founder of the Oratory of St Philip Neri?

This chapter has sought to show the central importance of both the Oratory and of its founder, St Philip Neri, in Newman's life, and also his particular *conception* of the Oratory. A question remains: what is the historical importance of that conception?

The institution founded by St Philip had undergone a very rapid expansion in the 16th and 17th centuries, firstly in Italy, then in the South-east of France, in Spain and from there to Mexico, and in other countries of Europe such as Germany and Poland. But by the middle of the 19th century it was languishing, if not semi-moribund, with the exception of a few communities in the North of Italy. However, the foundation by Newman of the Oratory in

England would lead eventually to a widespread renewal of the institution which continues to this day. And Newman's conception of the Oratory remains an important point of reference. In 1921, a group of seminarians in Innsbruck in Austria came upon a German translation of Newman's sermon on 'The Mission of St. Philip Neri'. Enthused by this discovery, two young Germans came to Birmingham to undertake an Oratorian noviciate. Returning to Germany, they founded in 1930 the first of several Oratories in that country. Within the last eighty or so years, from England, Germany and elsewhere a movement of expansion has occurred resulting in the existence (as at the end of 2016) of Oratories in 20 different countries on four continents, with new communities regularly being created.

In the noviciates of a number of these Oratories, Newman's writings on the Oratory, now fortunately mostly grouped within the covers of one large book (*NO*), are studied. If the Oratorian model of community life – flexible yet demanding – today attracts an increasingly large number of young men and already ordained priests, this inspiration is as much the work of Newman as of St Philip. It is tempting to conclude that, if St Philip Neri is unquestionably the original founder of the Oratory which bears his name, John Henry Newman can legitimately be considered to be its *re-founder* in the modern era.

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