

# SAN FILIPPO NERI

1515 - 1595 oratorio's founder - canonized 1112 march 1622 festivity 26 may  
From the book: "Il grande libro dei santi" (The great book of saints) ed. San Paolo



## The first years of the young Filippo

Born 21 July 1515 in a populous district beyond Arno in Florence, he had baptized, as all the Florentines, in the S. Giovanni Baptistery, with the name of Filippo Romolo.

We have few information about his infancy; his father, Francesco, practised the profession of notary, his mother, Lucrezia from Mosciano, died soon and the care of the small Filippo had entrusted to the stepmother.

From his sister Elisabetta's witness we know that while because of his unselfish and happy character he had nicknamed "good Pippo" (a nickname that stayed to him all life long), he never showed vocation or a particular devotion.

The only certain datum is the attendance of the san Marco convent, ("what I had of good - he would have told later - I have had from the father of san Marco") in which he could breathe the spirituality of Savonarola, still well alive, particularly in the years of the crisis of the republic and of the siege of Florence (1527-1530).

## Filippo moves to Rome

At 18 years old, in any case, he left Florence, where he should not return any more, to practice in commerce for a cousin in s. Germano in Campania, according to a popular use.

But the marketing must not be his vocation because in 1534-1535 he was already in Rome, where he would have stayed for more than 60 years, not moving until his death, in the decades of the more profound changes, from the first reforming tensions to the triumph of Counter-Reformation, from the Renaissance to his wane in the emerging Baroque world.

In the first years he lived as a tutor in the house of a Florentine business man, Galeotto del Caccia. His time seemed to be divided among his duty of tutor, the attendance of some theology and philosophy courses at the "Sapienza" university and at the "Studio Generale deli Agostiniani", and his continuous spiritual lonely pilgrimage in the ancient Rome (of the catacombs and of the basilicas) and in the new Rome of the young people of street, of the artisan and dealers, of the business man of Banchi: the mystical experience gradually prevailing and intense in the relationship with other spirituals who enlived the city during the last years of Paul III's pontificate (as Bonsignore Cacciaguerra), united to the desire of the reforming, referring to the primitive church as a model of the Christian individual and collective experience.

In 1548 he collaborated with Persiano Rosa, his confessor, to the foundation of the "Confraternita della SS. Trinità", dedicated in particular to the assistance to the poor pilgrims: the activity carried out during the Saint Year 1550, then, is central in his life, for the fusion between the anxiety of individual perfection and the search for his specific mission for the reformation for the church.

## Filippo priest



After having received in few months the minor and the major orders, he was ordained priest 23 may 1551 (in the eve of Holy Trinity festivity and in the anniversary of the starke of Savonarola).

As a priest, he entered among the chaplains of the church of Gerolamo della Carità, without any salary from the confraternity that managed it, in order to keep his freedom "offerens se volle servire suo arbitrio": the chaplains of S. Gerolamo were a community but, practicing the function of confessors, they became, with the group of Jesuits by the church of Jesus and the Dominicans by the Minerva, a centre of spirituality for large popular classes and then, also, with the development of the tridentinal reformation, for men from the curia, prelates, belonging to the high finance and to the patriciate.

The penitents around Filippo between 1553 and 1555 began to take a characteristics of group of reunions that gave origin gradually to the foundation of the oratorio. From the readings and common prayers of few people in Filippo's room they became reunions always more numerous in a barn soaring high above the church; in 1564 the small community borne around Filippo accepted, behind the request of the Florentine merchants and politicians, the responsibility of s. Giovanni de' Fiorentini: here, while Filippo stayed in s. Gerolamo, the first spiritual sons became priest, Cesare Baronio, Alessandro Fedeli, Giovan Francesco Bardini (to whom other would be added soon) joined, as a community without vows.

To the always increasing success of the reunions of the oratorio, of the devotional, collective and daily walks along Roman street and churches, of the more solemn visit to the 7 churches (pilgrimages one day long with masses, sermons, songs and also lunch), to which, especially during Carnival period, used to go, in some years, more that one thousand people, corresponded a considerable suspicion, particularly intense during Paolo IV and Pio V's pontificates; there were inquiries by the Roman vicarship and the Inquisition, being something "unusual" this method of spiritual reasoning, with presence of lays, this devotion that did not deny neither the official liturgy nor the sacraments, but looked for new spaces for the clerical and laycal perfection beyond the usual channels.

These enquiries came to nothing and the influence of Filippo and his group became increasingly stronger also in the posttridentinal curial ambient: the cardinal and prelates most bounded to the religious reformation used to participate to the reunion, and most of the were also Filippo's spiritual disciples.

## The filippini community

Gregorio XIII with the bull "Copious in misericordia" of 15 July 1575 recognised the new community, entrusting to it as a congregation of priest and clerks in minor orders, the small parish of s. Maria della Vallicella.

The old little church was demolished and in two years the big nave of the stately present church was built (but the completion and construction works for the adjacent buildings of the house and of the oratorio would have taken a long time) with an effort, also financial, that proves the support that Filippo and his community had found in roman high society. in 1577 the priests of oratorio moved to Vallicella, except Filippo that had never moved from his little room in s. Gerolamo and that only in 1583 accepted, on pressure of the pope and for health problem, to move by his community, of which he remained charismatic head more than parish priest for life: but this room in his last years seemed to be the centre of gravity of a life that went well beyond the group of his collaborators; he was point of reference and adviser of prelates, cardinal, and also of popes, and the influence exercised on Clemente VII on behalf of the absolution of Enrico IV of Navarra is known.

In 1593, owing to a painful and long illness (he was already 78 years old) he resigned from the function of parish priest of the congregation (his first successor was Cesare Baronio) and died 26 may 1595, assisted by card. Federico Borromeo.



## The miracles and the canonization

The cult that was spread immediately after his death, with the extension of the devotion and the attribution of countless miracles, seems to be the direct prosecution of the veneration of which he largely benefited also alive with the fame of the virtues and of the thaumaturgical abilities that had already encircled his person.

The canonical process, started immediately, finished in 1615 with the beatification; the canonization took place in 1622.

The almost total lack of written documents does not allow the formulation of a spiritual teaching; the particular characteristic of Filippo seems to be the perfect coincidence between the actual life of the person and the spiritual experience, with the reduction to the minimum of every theoretical development.

The traditional stereotype of Filippo Neri is

that of the calm, joyful man, that could create the love of God, of neighbour, of animals and of Nature, in an innocence kept in its freshness until the old age.

In this way the two friends and devote cardinal Agostino Valier and Gabriele Paleotti has handed down in two books, respectively "De laetitia christiana" and "De bono senectutis", that elect Filippo as a prototype of the Christian humanism, in which authority and freedom of spirit, pity and participation to the every day life joys and pains, are fused in a harmonic way. In this, there is much of true, even if it is necessary not to fall in the distortion of an ingenuous, childish image of Filippo.

The simplicity and his own joker and humorous character were often useful, even if not certainly as a mask, to hide the tension of an asceticism without half-measures, of a total involvement in the service of God and of the neighbour, tensions that were characteristic of the penances and the endless involvement in mercy works of his and his disciples' every day life. trying to view in a historical prospective and to define the centre of his message in an age of upsetting changes of papal Rome and of the Christendom, we think we can say that in the first times the mystical stimulus that ruled him (and that was characteristic of him also physically with continuous and frequent cardiac palpitations) was common to many of the spiritual centre that inserted in Rome during the first half of the cinquecento (so the most important readings of Filippo and of his group, from the medieval mystics to the lives of Father of desert, to the "Imitation of Christ", to Savonarola) the specific Filippo's message became that of an anti-heroic sanctity, of a perfection in spiritual life, that can be reached in every state of life, from the artisan to the curial, from the family man to the prelate, without parting from the world, but on the contrary, through the exercise of the elementary virtues of mercy, of simplicity, of patience, through the joyful acceptance of pains and of very death as end and perfection of our human nature.

From here the well known and endless call to the necessity of joy, of health care, of the psychic equilibrium; the distrust not only for every type of vision and ecstasy, but also for every exaggerate and excessive impulse of asceticism and penance fated not to last: "et si guastano et non sono più boni né per sé né per gli altri".

Nothing in the tridentinal liturgical and sacramental practice was isolated: mass and Eucharistic devotion, confession and frequent Holy Communion (always with moderation of times, case by case, from the every-day to the different periodicities), vocal prayers, cult of saints.

But it is necessary to tell that these practices were lived in a very original way by Filippo and his group, mainly with the exercise of the every day oratorio (nothing more antithetical to the contemporary development of the Ignatius exercise that sets their starting point in the separation from the world). but not only: the Eucharist not as a sacrifice, but more as height of everyday prayer and nourishment; the confession seemed having nothing to do with the

court of Counter-Reformation, becoming instead tender occasion of spiritual meetings and chief place where to manifest the "discretio spirituum" in an interpersonal relationship that was opening to the modernity; the continuous evolvement of the city with the overcoming of the sacred spaces of the churches and of the sanctuaries (walks among plazas and shops, collective and individual visits to hospital and other holy places, pilgrimages to the 7 church and devout walks) it was also an unusual thing fated to decline in baroque Rome, but a proposal full of originality: in the very clergy the creation of a "tertium genus" of tridentinal priests, fairly anomalous: neither a priest with souls care nor a religious bounded with vows and obedience, separated from the world, but free participant to the life of the common man. As a basis, the exact conviction that the reforming of the church and of Rome could not start from the institution of an regular secular clergy as a separate class, but from a total renewal of the Christian people in its actual historical structures, in its modernity: from here the not secondary Filippo's interest for the machinery of economic life - as proved by some miracles attributed to him - of the court-life or that productive (his passion for clocks could not be considered one of his follies or strangeness).

### **The oratorio**

The oratorio represents, as already pointed to, the fundamental projection of the spirituality of Filippo and his particular creature among the different spiritual currenties of the Italian Cinquecento.

It was not a fixed formula, but a flexible one, a process more than a rigid statement, that was different also the method by the Ignatius exercises.

Started from the afternoon reunions in the Filippo's little room in S. Gerolamo, in 1552 as ensemble of readings and spiritual conversation among tight group of friends, it extended, moving at first in a barn above the church of s. Giovanni by the riverside of Tevere and in the end of Vallicella, attracting a coloured world composed by members of court society, but also by many common people and artisans in their afternoon free hours in working days.

The formula was very free and flexible in adapting to the different cultural levels: all through the tow hours or more everybody was free to pop in and out according to the possibility and to the interest; the sermons were held in plain ad dialogue form, not from the pulpit, but from a chair, with total rejection of the traditional and authoritarian rhetoric of the sermon.

Usually the reunion began with the reading of devout books and of saints' lives, then took place the sermons (four in their best days) with distribution in every day alternate turns (one more learned and elaborate; for years Cesare Baronio exposed themes of the ecclesiastical history, adding with this popularisation, the writing of his "Annales"); then music and songs featuring musicians friends as Giovanni Animuccia and Francisco Soto Langa that published their laud composed for the oratorio during Filippo's life, passing from the simple monody to the more extended polyphonic execution: it was not already the "oratorical" musical kind, that would have been developed only later in 1600 thanks to the following generation, but that had certainly here its spiritual and artistic roots.

A short said of father Filippo or of one of his substitute and the final prayers ended the reunion. At evenings a more bounded group started to meet for other prayers and meditations (some days a week also with the exercise of the "discipline") and the community that took form in the common life of s. Giovanni de' Fiorentini started from this "small" oratorio, with some elementary rules for the every day life, but without creating a religious order.

Filippo never wanted to create formally a new religious order, both because of his natural inclination to freedom ("per non essere disubbiditi - he used to say - non bisogna comandare"), and because of the definite choice not to establish, with vows or other legal bounds, corps separated by Christian people.

Despite the recognition bull for the congregation by Gregorio XIII in 1575 foresees the draft of rules or statutes, Filippo delayed the problem from year to year. only in 1582-1583 a first draft was written; in 1588 a second text was developed and in 1595-1596 a third one with a minimum number of rules for common life together, based on the consensus, on the maintenance of ample sphere of personal freedom (included the right of ownership).

It was this steadiness of Filippo that created already in the '70s to a first conflict with Carlo Borromeo, who wanted to use the filippins, inserting them in the diocesan Milanese structures (after the denial of Filippo, that withdrew the four priest that he had sent for few months

in 1576 in Milan, Carlo would have founded the oblates of S. Ambrogio) and to contrast, in the '80s, also inside the same filippina community, among the Roman fathers, strictly bound to the idea of total freedom (both inside the singles communities and among the different communities that were developing in different cities) and the fathers from Naples oratorio, that stood up for the need of an organization almost monastic.

During the difficult change after Filippo's death it was repeated the rejection of vows, and that principle was welcomed also in the constitution of congregation, at last approved by Paolo V with short "Christifidelium" of 24 February 1612, with a difficult balance between the needs of institutional type and the filippino's ideal of freedom that was as a basis for the peculiarity of the oratorio communities in canonical law to the present day.