

Vincent and the Oratory

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“absent minded child”

Msgr. Ronald Knox said, some four hundred years after the death of St Philip Neri, that Philip "absent mindedly" founded the community that was originally only a movement centred around friendship with him.¹

St Philip Neri was born in Florence in 1515. He died on May 26, 1595, in his eightieth year, when Vincent de Paul was a boy of fourteen. By the time Vincent was thirty, the one time farmer's son had come under the influence of one of the great Oratorians of France, de Bérulle. The Oratory itself, St Philip's "absent minded child", had, by then, changed remarkably from the single - house concept of the Founder to a powerful and numerous congregation. The multi-housed group was to wield much influence for the next couple of hundred years. The Revolution was to cause its demise. It rose again in 1852, metamorphosed and diminished as were Saint Sulpice, the Eudists and the Vincentians.²

“.....he was able to be confirmed in his Englishness”

But in 1849, John Henry Newman, fresh convert that he was, founded an Oratory in the suburb of Edgbaston in the English city of Birmingham. He had spent a few months at the Chiesa Nuova, the Roman Oratory, to learn the skills of Oratorian living, returning refreshed in his religious self, but enmeshed in his being English..

One of the things that Newman loved about the Oratory was that he was able to be confirmed in his Englishness. Brompton in London, later became independent, not only because that is what an Oratory did, but because it could not let Birmingham stay so very English. The life of an Oratory is said to be built with regard for "well known faces".³ Newman was to say that he liked an Oratory to have no more than a dozen priests.

¹ Halbert Weidner, C.O., *Traveling Light in Community*, THE ORATORY, The Oratory, 434 Charlotte Ave Rock Hill,S.C. 29731 USA.

² For a splendid article, glittering with endnotes, see *The Congregation of the Oratory* by John Patrick Donnelly SJ in De Molen (Ed) 1994, *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation*, Fordham University Press, N.Y.

³ An article by Halbert Weidner CO, *Newman's Oratory Charism*, in the *Review for Religious*, in 1992 , says: "When Newman had a chance to defend Roman Catholicism.....against Pusey, there was also the possibility of distancing that same Catholicism from the foreign enthusiasm of converts like Manning, Ward, and Faber. Newman could declare: "I prefer English habits of belief and devotion to foreign, from the same causes, and by the same right, which justifies foreigners in preferring their own. In following those of my people, I show less singularity, and create less disturbance than if I made a flourish with what is novel and exotic."

However, The Brompton Oratory looked "across the Alps" for every hint of "How to be TRULY Roman Catholic". It is interesting to note that there seems to have been little real communication with the "heart" of the Church even then. If we look at the Brompton of 2000 CE, perhaps the image of Rome is really a mirage, an image warped in space as well as time, both then and now.

Some french influences

One might well wonder why the emphasis in this article has been more on Newman and Birmingham, and Faber and Brompton, rather than on the Oratories of St Vincent's time. It might well be that readers of English have only the English Oratories in mind when we posit Vincent with the Oratories of France.

It is remarkable, maybe because of Vincentian congregational myopia, how we tend to think of St Vincent as so revolutionary in the structure of the Company and ignore other structures in France of the 17th century.

There were communities other than the Oratorians without Religious Vows. In 1643 Jean-Jaques Olier received approval for such a community of priests for staffing seminaries. St John Eudes left the Oratorians in 1643 and instituted the Congregation of Jesus and Mary: diocesan priests without vows, running seminaries and giving parish missions. Adrien Bourdoise, friend of both Vincent and de Berulle, set up a group of priests in the Parish of St Nicholas de Chardonnet.⁴

It may be that these men were following in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul. After all, he had started his work as early as 1617 when he was working for the "real founders" of the future Company. He was already well on the way to a conversion and much of this may well be credited to his spiritual director, Pierre de Bérulle. St Vincent was to say that "Cardinal de Bérulle was one of the holiest men he knew." Since de Bérulle did not become a Cardinal until 1627, and had died in 1629, it would seem that Vincent's remark would have been made after 1629 when Vincent seems to have ceased being directed by Pierre de Bérulle.⁵

Vincent de Paul and Pierre de Bérulle

It seems that Vincent and de Bérulle first came to know each other in 1608. Vincent had been a priest for eight years. His association with the gentry was providing some good addresses and some useful people. In 1610 the incident with the accusing judge had taken place. Vincent seems already being changed from the professional priest, full of ambition, to someone aware of, and reacting to, basic goodness.

De Bérulle put the final touches to the French Oratory on November 11, 1611. Vincent lived with them for a while but by May 2, 1612, he had gone to Clichy.⁶ This period would have been the

⁴ St Louise's son, Michael, was one of those aspiring to be trained. See Roman, p190

⁵ For the relationship with de Berulle from the beginning, see *St. Vincent de Paul, A Biography*, Fr José Maria Román C.M. translated by Sr Joyce Howard D.C., Melisende, London, 1999, page 96 et al.

⁶ Op.cit. p97

first time that St Vincent would have lived in a community of secular priests. Perhaps the ambience was already indicative of de Bérulle becoming something of a prima donna.

The Oratory in Naples and Rome

This French house of the Oratory was modeled in some ways, more on the house at Naples rather than that at Rome. Even in St Philip's time, Naples had some innovations that could cause trouble. One was the introduction of a Promise of Stability (not a vow) and the other was with regard to the possession of private means. Naples was having trouble because a number of young men were interested but they were without the essential that Philip Neri wanted: the ability to provide for oneself.

By February 14, 1612, Rome and Naples had been sorted out by papal Decree. After that date, all houses calling themselves Congregation of the Oratory were to be on the Roman pattern of One House = One Congregation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the number based on the Roman model reached 150.⁷

A prominent factor in Roman Oratory style was the basic equality of each member, priest or layman. For convenience they chose a Provost (Local superior) who, in fact in ecclesiastical law was a Major superior, but the running of the house etc was done by agreement rather than decree.

However, despite the Roman wishes, it was in France that a form of the Oratory really flourished. Any Oratory can and maybe should, take a distinctive tone. But the concept that Neri had, of prayer and work organised at a local level, was to vanish with the French model.

De Bérulle may well have been a holy man but there are plenty of indications that he was also an interfering man. Neri had not wanted his men to run seminaries, nor to direct nuns. De Bérulle became very involved with Carmelite Nuns, wanting them to add a further vow of servitude to God. Both the Jesuits and the Discalced Friars were annoyed with him as were many of the Nuns.

However, there was no doubting his ability to inspire and attract. A year after the Cardinal's death in 1629, there were sixty three communities including thirteen colleges and four seminaries staffed by 400 priests, not counting laybrothers and young men in formation. In 1650 there were 480 priests. The French Oratory peaked at 650 priests in 1714 after which a decline set in.⁸

“....the wretched little one at the Bons Enfants”

It is interesting to note how troubled Vincent was in the matter of the CMs taking vows. This article is not the place to elaborate on this matter. Suffice to say that the shrewd Vincent de Paul

⁷ See Donnelly's article, p198 et seq

⁸ Donnelly's article, page 206 et seq. Gives an interesting breakdown on figures like this. One of the problems they had was that, because there was no formal bonding by vow or promise, many joined to become well educated and the Oratorian colleges were in fact teachers' colleges.

would have known all the difficulties that the French Oratory were having with stability and with the possession of property. On one occasion Vincent quoted an Oratorian as saying: "The Oratory is just a respectable lodging house."⁹ The antagonism Vincent received from Rome (including hostility from the Roman Oratory) for the foundation and statutes of the Company has to be seen in the light of a good number of the Oratorians becoming Cardinals and consequently, having much influence on what suited them.

Another area of conflict would have been with centralising needs on the part of Vincent. Vincent wanted his men to be mobile, indeed universally so. Their mobility was best ensured then, as it may well be today, by the Superior General being in control. The French Oratories, with all their tendencies to be centrally controlled by de Bérulle would have had Neri's wishes and concepts known to them, if not near to them. Not only was Vincent a Centralist as far as government was concerned, but the bulk of his letters indicate a person who has to nose his way into all kinds of affairs. This would seem to be contrary to a more liberal spirit such as Neri had.

Gradually, de Bérulle ceased to have an influence on Vincent de Paul. Bérulle died some thirty years before St Vincent. His successor, Father Condren, helped Vincent all he could but already there was a growing animosity between the French Oratory and the Congregation of the Mission. They were engaged in the same works at the same time in history. Jealousy must surely have been at the root of the matter. There was no open warfare but it is interesting that, ten days before he died, Vincent was comparing the four seminaries of Paris:

"In Paris there are four houses that specialise in this work: the Oratory, St Sulpice,, St Nicholas de Chardonnet and the wretched little one at the Bons Enfants.

The aim at St Sulpice is to subordinate everything to the spirit and then to purify this; to free the people from earthly desires and lead them onto higher aspirations and feelings. We notice that all who have been there show these characteristics; some more than others. I do not know whether they teach Scholastic Theology there.

Those at St Nicholas are not quite so lofty-minded and tend to work in the Lord's vineyard by training men to labour at their priestly functions. With this intention they keep first of all to the practical application of their priestly training and, secondly, they take on lowly tasks like sweeping, washing up, scrubbing etc. They can do this because most of the students do not pay anything and the arrangement works well.

We will leave the Oratorians out of it and not talk about them.....¹⁰"

Those members of the Congregation of the Mission who speak of the many ways we follow the pattern of the Jesuits, will be interested in noting that although the Oratory may well have been the first Community Vincent stayed in, it was to the Jesuits that he turned. As the Company grew

⁹ Roman, op.cit p328
¹⁰ Roman, op.cit. p 375

and it became obvious that the young men would need special help in living community life, Vincent sent Fr Jean de la Salle to live with the Jesuits for a few months.¹¹

“... the course of History might well have changed if”

This essay has been an attempt to see the interaction of Vincent de Paul with the Oratory not of St Philip Neri but of Jesus and Mary Immaculate as managed by Pierre de Bérulle. The picture is not always pleasant but that is to be expected. We are looking at two strong men, both powerful, both holy, both men of their times. Both seem to have accepted the strata of society not recognising that kings and queens would lose their heads in more ways than one. The time would come with scarcely a crowned head left in Europe and that both men would wonder, as they might from heaven, at new times, new ways of Church and State undreamed of by either.

Hilaire Belloc at school at the Birmingham Oratory, when Newman lived there, saw Cardinal Newman as a joke. Jack, as the boys called Newman, would sweep into a class room and make the boys (ten year olds) recite some Virgil and then burst into tears at its poignancy. Once a year Eminence would direct a Latin play, usually Terence, with all the earthier jokes excised. Neri before was a joker and a prankster constantly getting into trouble for his irreverence and his eccentricity.¹²

Vincent de Paul would never have seen Pierre de Bérulle as a joke. Maybe the course of History might well have changed if St Vincent's friends had been Neri's sons in the Roman rather than the French fashion.

¹¹ Roman, op.cit p283. Was this the beginnings of the Rodriguez Tradition?

¹² Wilson, A.N., *Hilaire Belloc*, Penguin 1986 , p17 et seq.