

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Philip Neri

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 26

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IN BRIEF

Saint Philip Neri

Florentine priest who became the Apostle of Rome, founder of the Congregation of the Oratory, known as the saint of joy.

Feast day	May 26
Born	July 21, 1515, Florence, Italy
Died	May 26, 1595, Rome, Italy
Canonized	March 12, 1622, by Pope Gregory XV
Era	16th century
Patron saint of	Rome, Oratorians, educators

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Novena to Saint Philip Neri

Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), Tomb of Saint Philip Neri in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Philip Neri

Saint Philip Neri was a priest from Florence who spent almost his entire life in Rome in the 16th century, so fully that he came to be called "the Apostle of Rome." A tireless confessor and a friend of young people, the poor and artists, he founded the Congregation of the Oratory and helped renew the Church after the Council of Trent, with a simplicity and a sense of humor that remain famous. He died on May 26, 1595, was canonized in 1622, and his feast day is May 26.

Who was Saint Philip Neri?

Filippo Neri was born on July 21, 1515, in Florence, into a family of modest means: his father, Francesco, was a notary. He lost his mother when he was very young. He was such a cheerful and helpful child that people called him "Pippo buono," good little Philip. He spent time at the Dominican friary of San Marco, still marked by the memory of Savonarola.

At around eighteen, he was sent to a relative who was a merchant at San Germano, at the foot of Monte Cassino, to learn the trade. But Philip felt a different call. Around 1534 he left for Rome, with no money and no clear plan.

In Rome he lodged with a fellow Florentine, Galeotto Caccia, teaching his children in exchange for a room and a little food. For a while he attended courses in philosophy and theology, then sold his books and gave the money to the poor. He lived as a consecrated layman, praying for long hours, often at night, in the churches and catacombs, and speaking about God to passersby, shopkeepers and the young men he met in the streets.

Key dates in the life of Saint Philip Neri

- **July 21, 1515**: Born in Florence.
- **Around 1534**: Arrives in Rome.
- **Pentecost 1544**: In the Catacomb of San Sebastiano, he has an intense mystical experience of the Holy Spirit.
- **1548**: With his confessor Persiano Rosa, he founds the Confraternity of the Most Holy Trinity of Pilgrims, to serve pilgrims and convalescents.
- **May 23, 1551**: Ordained a priest; he settles at San Girolamo della Carità.
- **1550s**: The first gatherings of the Oratory and the Seven Churches pilgrimage begin.
- **July 15, 1575**: Pope Gregory XIII establishes the Congregation of the Oratory and entrusts it with the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella.
- **1583**: He moves to the Vallicella, where the Chiesa Nuova is rising.
- **May 26, 1595**: Dies in Rome, during the night following the feast of Corpus Christi.
- **1615**: Beatified by Pope Paul V.
- **March 12, 1622**: Canonized by Pope Gregory XV, on the same day as Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Ávila and Isidore the Farmer.

The fire of Pentecost

Philip loved to pray at night in the Catacomb of San Sebastiano, on the Appian Way. According to his early biographers, on the eve of Pentecost 1544, as he was asking God for the Holy Spirit, he saw what seemed to be a globe of fire enter his mouth and set his chest ablaze. From that day on, he felt an intense heat and a heartbeat so strong that it could be seen from the outside. After his death, the autopsy found that his ribs were deformed over the heart. The Church has not pronounced on the exact nature of this phenomenon, but the episode helps explain the ardor that marked his whole life.

The confessor of Rome and the Oratory

Ordained a priest in 1551, almost reluctantly, Philip settled at San Girolamo della Carità. He spent hours in the confessional, starting at dawn, and drew people of every walk of life: cardinals, craftsmen, young nobles, prostitutes, the sick.

In the afternoon, he gathered in his room anyone who wished to come, to read the Bible or the lives of the saints, talk about them freely, pray and sing. These meetings eventually moved to a room above the church called the "oratory," and the name stuck. Music played a large part in them, and the musical form known as the oratorio grew out of these gatherings.

The Seven Churches pilgrimage

Philip also organized the pilgrimage to the seven churches of Rome, a long and joyful walk with prayers, hymns and a picnic. It drew crowds and, for many, replaced the excesses of carnival. Pilgrims still make this walk today.

A congregation without vows

Around Philip gathered a group of secular priests who took no vows and were bound together only by charity: this became the Congregation of the Oratory, approved in 1575. Each house is independent, a feature that still marks the Oratorians today. Among his disciples was the future Cardinal Cesare Baronius, author of the *Ecclesiastical Annals*.



The Chiesa Nuova and the Oratory of the Filippini, in Rome.

Joy and humility

Philip is remembered as the saint of joy. He joked, sometimes dressed up in odd clothes, and asked his disciples to perform slightly ridiculous gestures to cure them of vanity. He fled every mark of admiration. He was wary of sadness, scruples and melancholy, which he saw as obstacles to the spiritual life.

Yet this cheerfulness rested on deep prayer and real asceticism. When he celebrated Mass, he sometimes fell into ecstasies so long that, toward the end of his life, he was allowed to celebrate it privately.

He advised popes and cardinals, among them Charles Borromeo, and accompanied Camillus de Lellis in his vocation. He nevertheless refused every honor, including, according to his biographers, a cardinal's hat.

Why is Saint Philip Neri the patron saint of Rome and of educators?

Philip is one of the patron saints of Rome because he spent his life renewing the faith of its people, one confession and one conversation at a time. He is the patron of the Oratorians, the priests who follow his way of life. He is also invoked by educators and by all who work with young people, because he spent decades welcoming, listening to and guiding the youth of the city. Many people also turn to him to keep their joy, and when they struggle with sadness or scruples.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Saint Philip Neri shows that holiness can be joyful, simple and close to people. He renewed Christian life in Rome not through large institutions, but through friendship, confession, the shared Word of God and good humor. English-speaking Catholics know his spirit especially through Saint John Henry Newman, who brought the Oratory to England in the 19th century.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Philip Neri or follow the novena to Saint Philip Neri, from May 17 to 25, ending on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Philip Neri in art

Philip is usually shown as an elderly priest with a white beard, often wearing a red chasuble, as in the famous painting by Guido Reni. He is frequently depicted in prayer or in ecstasy, his eyes raised toward the Virgin and Child. Lilies, a symbol of purity, and a burning heart, which recalls the fire of Pentecost 1544, sometimes accompany him.

Where to pray to Saint Philip Neri

- **Rome**: the Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), where his body rests and where his rooms can be visited.

- **Rome**: the church of San Girolamo della Carità, where he lived for more than thirty years.
- **Rome**: the Catacomb of San Sebastiano, the place of his Pentecost experience in 1544.
- **Florence**: his hometown, where the church of San Firenze was entrusted to the Oratorians.
- **Oratories around the world**: communities of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri, including those in England founded in Newman's wake, keep his feast with special devotion.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Philip Neri for Joy and Humility

Saint Philip Neri wrote almost nothing: he burned most of his papers before he died. His first biographers, who had known him, did however collect many of his sayings and the short prayers he loved to repeat and recommend. This page presents some of them, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia asking for joy and humility.

The short prayers of Saint Philip

Philip advised his penitents to pray often during the day with brief invocations that are easy to remember. His biographers record several of them, translated here from the Italian by Saintspedia:

> *"Lord, keep your hand on Philip today, or Philip will betray you."*
>
> *"Virgin Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me."*

Source: sayings handed down by the early biographers of Saint Philip Neri, notably Antonio Gallonio (*Vita del beato P. Filippo Neri*, 1601) and Pietro Giacomo Bacci (*Vita di S. Filippo Neri*, 1622), texts in the public domain. Philip recommended the second invocation in the form of a chaplet, repeating it on each bead.



Saint Philip Neri at prayer.

Prayer to Saint Philip Neri for joy and humility

Saint Philip, you loved God with a burning heart and loved people with a smile: pray for me.

Drive out of my life the sadness that paralyzes and the scruples that imprison. Give me the simple joy of those who know they are loved by God, and the humility to laugh at myself.

You welcomed everyone in the confessional and in your room: teach me to listen, to encourage and to help grow those whom God places on my path, especially the young. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Keep your hand on me today, Lord, for without you I can do nothing. Virgin Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Philip Neri is celebrated on May 26, the day of his death in 1595. You can pray to him in moments of discouragement, when sadness or scruples weigh on you, and for young people, teachers, confessors and communities. His short invocations can be repeated at any moment of the day, on the way to work or before a difficult conversation, just as he taught his penitents to do.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Philip Neri, and discover the life of Saint Philip Neri.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Philip Neri

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Philip Neri and by the sayings his early biographers attribute to him. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on May 17; it ends on May 25, the day before his feast on May 26. It can also be prayed at any time of year, especially in a season of discouragement.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. True to the spirit of Saint Philip, the suggested act is often simple and cheerful. If you can, add his favorite short prayer: "Virgin Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me."

You can pray this novena alone, as a family or as a group. Philip loved shared prayer, and the Oratory was born from friends gathering to read, pray and sing together. If a day is missed, simply pick up where you left off: what matters is the trust with which you return to God.



Saint Philip Neri, in a church statue or window.

Day 1: Good little Philip

As a child in Florence, he was called "Pippo buono," good little Philip. Ordinary goodness, lived day after day, is already a path to holiness. Philip did not begin with great deeds, but with kindness toward those around him.

Prayer: Lord, make me good in little things, where no one is watching. Let my kindness be simple and sincere.

Today: Do someone a quiet favor without letting anyone know.

Day 2: Leaving everything

Philip gave up a future as a merchant and left for Rome with nothing. He trusted God for the next day. Later he even sold his books to give the money to the poor. His freedom made room for God.

Prayer: Lord, free me from what weighs me down, and teach me to rely on you for what I truly need.

Today: Give away something you do not really need.

Day 3: Praying at night

In the catacombs, Philip spent whole nights in prayer. The joy he radiated was born of this silence with God. His humor was never shallow: it came from a heart that had learned to rest in the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, give me a taste for silent prayer, and draw me to yourself.

Today: Take ten minutes of silent prayer in the evening.

Day 4: The fire of the Spirit

At Pentecost 1544, Philip felt himself set ablaze by the Holy Spirit. His heart burned with love for God and for his neighbor, and that fire never went out. The Spirit is not an idea: he is the living love of God poured into our hearts.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, warm my lukewarm heart and kindle in me the fire of your love.

Today: Pray the *Veni Creator* or the "Come, Holy Spirit."

Day 5: Serving pilgrims

With the Confraternity of the Holy Trinity of Pilgrims, Philip welcomed poor pilgrims and the sick who were leaving the hospital still weak. Charity, for him, was concrete: a bed, a meal, a word of comfort.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to strangers and to those who are recovering, and make me a place of welcome for them.

Today: Check in on someone who is sick or alone.

Day 6: The confessional

As a priest, Philip spent hours hearing confessions. He welcomed everyone gently and helped them get back on their feet without discouraging them. He knew that mercy, not fear, changes hearts.

Prayer: God of mercy, give me the confidence to come to you with my faults, without fear.

Today: Go to confession, or prepare for your next one.

Day 7: The Word shared

At the Oratory, people read Scripture and the lives of the saints, talked about them simply and sang together. Faith grew through friendship. Philip knew that we need one another to stay close to God.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those with whom I share the faith. Help us to encourage one another.

Today: Share a passage of the Gospel with someone close to you.

Day 8: Joy against sadness

Philip drove away sadness and scruples with trust and good humor. For him, joy was a fruit of the Spirit, not a matter of temperament. He saw that gloom closes the heart, while a cheerful heart opens itself more easily to grace.

Prayer: Lord, deliver me from sadness and scruples, and give me the joy of those who know they are loved.

Today: Make someone smile who is going through a hard time.

Day 9: Humility

Philip fled honors and laughed at himself. He refused high office and asked God each morning to keep his hand on him. Humility kept his joy light and free.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Keep your hand on me today. Through the intercession of Saint Philip Neri, give me a humble and joyful heart. Amen.

Today: Accept a small humiliation with a smile.

Closing prayer

Saint Philip Neri, Apostle of Rome and friend of all, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for me, for young people and for those who accompany them. Obtain for us a heart burning for God and a joy that nothing can extinguish. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Philip Neri and the prayer to Saint Philip Neri.

PILGRIMAGE

Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), Tomb of Saint Philip Neri in Rome

The Chiesa Nuova, or Santa Maria in Vallicella, in the historic center of Rome, is the church that Saint Philip Neri received in 1575 for his Congregation of the Oratory. He has rested there since his death in 1595. It is the main pilgrimage site devoted to "the Apostle of Rome," and the mother church of the Oratorians.

A "new church" for the Oratory

In 1575, Pope Gregory XIII approved the Congregation of the Oratory and entrusted it with a small old church, Santa Maria in Vallicella. Philip decided to rebuild it entirely, larger: hence the name "Chiesa Nuova," the new church, which has remained in use. The work stretched over several decades. Next door, in the 17th century, the architect Francesco Borromini built the Oratory of the Philippines, a hall intended for the prayer and music meetings that gave their name to the oratorio.



The façade of the Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), in Rome.

The chapel and tomb of Saint Philip

Saint Philip's body rests in a chapel richly decorated with marble, to the left of the choir. Above the altar, a mosaic reproduces the painting by Guido Reni showing him in ecstasy before the Virgin. In the choir, Peter Paul Rubens painted three large canvases in the early 17th century around an ancient image of the Virgin venerated in the church, and Pietro da Cortona decorated the dome and the vault.

In the neighboring house, visitors can see, on certain dates, the rooms where Philip spent his last years. They preserve objects and mementos of the saint.

Praying at the Chiesa Nuova

Before your visit, you may wish to read the life of Saint Philip Neri. Before his chapel, a time of silence lets you entrust an intention to him, for example for a discouraged person or for the young people you accompany. The prayer to Saint Philip Neri, with its short invocations, suits this well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The nave of the Chiesa Nuova, decorated by Pietro da Cortona.

Other places connected with Saint Philip Neri

- **San Girolamo della Carità**, in Rome: the church where he lived from 1551 to 1583 and where the Oratory was born.
- **Catacombs of Saint Sebastian**, on the Appian Way: the site of his Pentecost experience of 1544.
- **Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini**, in Rome: the church of the confraternity he founded in 1548.

- **The pilgrimage of the seven churches**: Saint Peter's, Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Saint Sebastian, Saint John Lateran, Holy Cross in Jerusalem, Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls, and Saint Mary Major.
- **Florence**: his native city.

Practical information

The Chiesa Nuova is on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, between Piazza Navona and the Tiber, easy to reach on foot or by bus. On May 26, the feast of Saint Philip, and the days before it, the Oratorians organize special celebrations, and the saint's rooms are then often open. Check Mass and visiting hours with the community before you come.

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