



An 1833 lithography depicting the episode when a donkey lost its footing and tumbled into a cellar with young Philip Neri winding up underneath the animal.



St Philip Neri's post-mortem mask venerated in the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo in Senglea.



The main altar on the right transept of Senglea's Porto Salvo church dedicated to St Philip Neri. The altarpiece, framed by elaborately carved Baroque stonework by Petruzzo Debono, was made by Don Pedro Nunez de Villavencio. The painting is described in the acts of Bishop Michael Molina's pastoral visit of 1680.

St Philip Neri and the

Fabian Mangion

Catholic saints are human beings who lived extraordinary lives. If one had to choose a saint who showed the humorous side of holiness, it would be Philip Neri. On the other hand, he was a sign of contradiction, combining popularity with piety against the background of a corrupt Rome and an indifferent clergy, the main elements of post-Renaissance malaise.

Born in Florence on July 22, 1515, Neri showed the impulsiveness and spontaneity of his character from the time he was a boy. One incident almost cost him his life. Seeing a donkey laden with fruit for market, the little boy had barely thought of jumping on the donkey's back before he did it. The surprised donkey lost its footing, and together with the fruit and boy tumbled into a cellar with Neri ending up beneath the animal.

Miraculously, he was unharmed. This incident of the eight-year-old Neri is dear to his early biographers as the first visible intervention of Providence on his behalf, and perhaps dearer still to his disciples, because it reveals the human characteristics of a boy amid the supernatural of a saint.

Neri was a man remarkable for the sweetness of his disposition, for his intense personal love of God and for his merriment. At an early age he left home to go to live in an attic in Rome in order to prepare himself for whatever work God wanted him to do.

At this period, religion was at a low ebb in the city. There were grave abuses in the Church, and educated men of the time had more use for classical literature than for Christian writing. Rome needed to be re-evangelised, and this was the life work of Neri, justly called 'the Apostle of Rome'.

He devoted himself entirely to the sanctification of his own soul and the good of his neighbour in a vocation unusual at the time. After dark he would go out in the streets, and most often into the catacombs of San Sebastiano to pray.

In this catacomb, a few days before Pentecost in 1544, the well-known miracle of his heart took place: there appeared to him a globe of fire, which entered into his mouth and lodged in his breast. Placing his hand to his bosom, he felt by the side of his heart a swelling

about as big as a man's fist, but neither then nor afterwards was it accompanied with the slightest pain or wound.

The cause of this swelling was discovered by doctors who examined his body after death. The saint's heart had been dilated under the sudden impulse of love, and in order that it might have sufficient room to move, two ribs had been curved in the form of an arch. From the time of the miracle till his death, his heart would palpitate violently whenever he performed any spiritual action.

Neri's appealing personality soon won him friends from all levels of society. In 1548, he formed the lay confraternity *Santissima Trinità de' Pellegrini* to minister to pilgrims who came to Rome without food or shelter. His private life was that of a hermit.

He started casual conversations at street corners, visited the sick, revived the ancient tradition of the visitations to the seven churches of Rome, which had fallen into neglect, and popularised devotion to the 40 hours prayer.

It was not till May 23, 1551, that he was ordained priest, following the advice of his spiritual director Don Persiano Rosa. From now on, much of his day was spent in the confessional of the church of *San Girolamo della Carità*.

Young men, to whom he recommended that they confess more often than they did, received from him the direction they needed to grow spiritually. Neri began to realise, though, that these young men needed something more than absolution; they needed guidance. So Neri began to ask the young men to pass by in the early afternoon to discuss spiritual readings and then stay for prayer.

He and his companions organised conferences in their oratory, and with the authorisation of a papal bull dated July 15, 1575, they became officially known as the Congregation of the Oratory, a community made up of secular priests and clerics. A feature of their life was a daily afternoon service of informal talks, with vernacular hymns and prayers. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina was one of Neri's followers, and composed music for the services.

Neri was known to be spontaneous and unpredictable, charming and humorous. Many people wrongly feel that such an attractive and jocular personality cannot be combined with an intense spirituality. Neri's life melted these rigid, narrow attitudes to piety. His approach to sanctity was

truly Catholic, all-embracing and accompanied by a good laugh. He always wanted his followers to become not less, but more human through their striving for holiness.

Neri seemed to sense the different ways to bring people to God. He preferred spiritual mortification to physical mortification, which he himself did not avoid. Humility was the most important virtue he tried to teach others and to learn himself. Some of his lessons in humility seem cruel, but they were tinged with humour and were related with gratitude by the people they helped.

Even his own efforts to humble himself were humorous. There are stories of him wearing ridiculous clothes or walking around with half his beard shaved off. The greater his reputation for holiness the sillier he wanted to seem.

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By order of the Pope he set out to rebuild one of Rome's churches, which came to be known as the *Chiesa Nuova*, and it is in this church that he is buried. The Congregation of the Oratory which he founded was never very large, but among its sons was the great cardinal Blessed John Henry Newman.

Neri died on May 27, 1595, at the age of 80, worn out by his labours, consumed by his love of God and neighbour. Celebrated by many as one of the most cheerful of God's saints, he was beatified by Paul V in 1615, and canonised by Gregory XV in 1622.

Speaking of Neri, whom he called, "the saint of joy", St John Paul II said: "As is well known, the saint used to put his teaching into short and wise maxims: 'Be good, if you can'. He did not choose the life of solitude; but, in exercising his ministry among the common people, he also wished to be 'salt' for all those who met him. Like Jesus, he was equally able to enter into the human misery present in the noble palaces and in the alleys of Renaissance Rome." (October 7, 1994)

The Congregation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri is today a pontifical society of apostolic life of Catholic priests and lay brothers who live together in a community bound together by no formal vows. They are commonly referred to as Oratorians.

The first Maltese to join the Oratorians was the renowned Don Giovanni Magri, who after leaving the Society of Jesus was received as a diocesan priest and then joined the Oratorian community at Messina. After returning to Malta, Bishop Miguel Juan Balaguer Camarasa appointed him parish priest of Vittoriosa in 1648, and in 1649 assigned him to St Paul's parish, Valletta.

Although it is difficult to determine whether Magri had been involved in the establishment of the first Oratorian community, it is a fact that just 50 years after the death of Neri, Malta was fortunate enough to experience the presence, in Vittoriosa, of the first community of priests, following the method and spirit of St Philip Neri and subject to the bishop's jurisdiction.

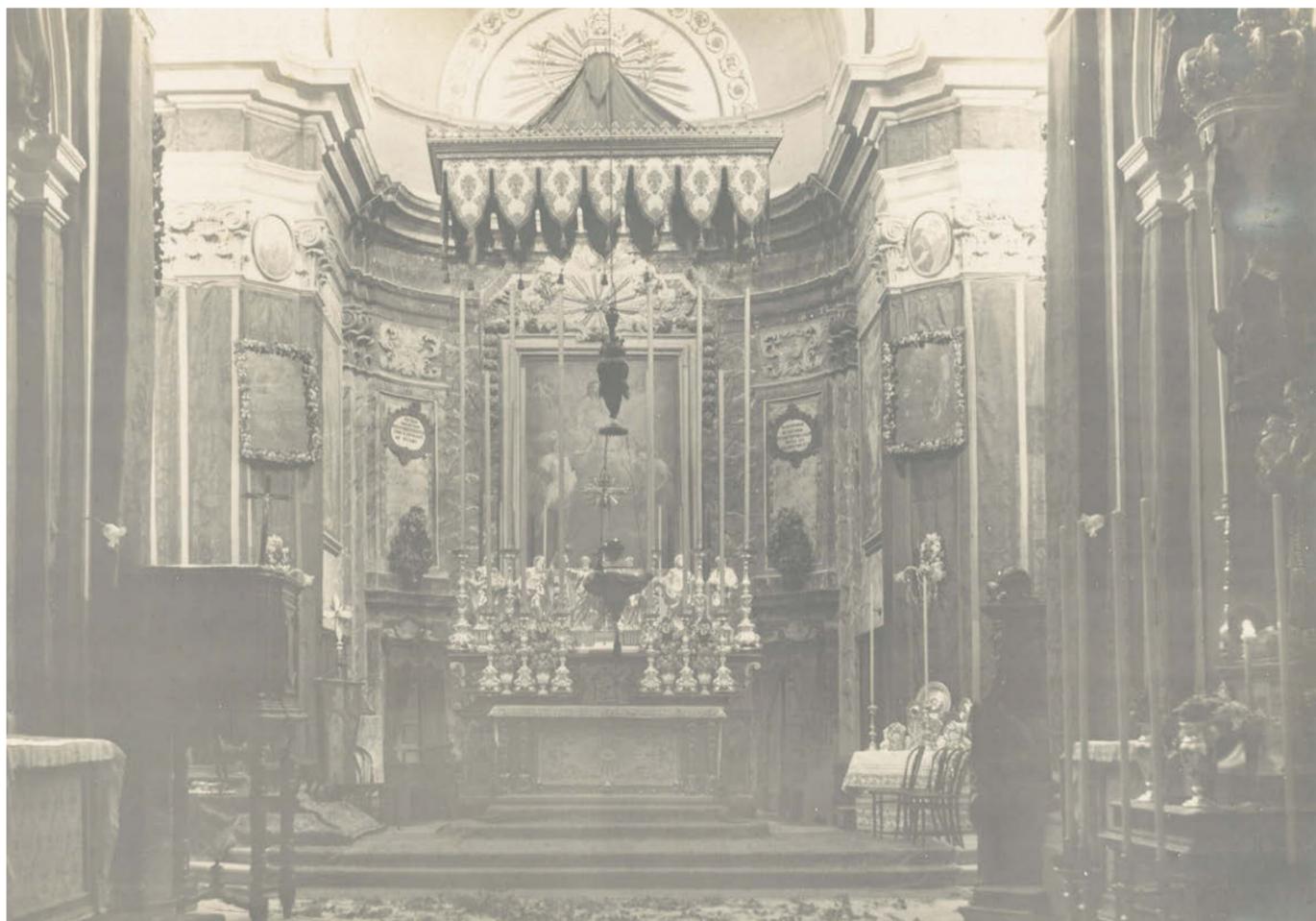
The oratory of *San Filippo* in Vittoriosa consisted of a small community. Records of pastoral visitations illustrate the church, the oratory and the convent, but do not say anything regarding their daily activities. Nonetheless, their objective was threefold: prayer, preaching, and the administration of the sacraments.

In 1652, Bishop Balaguer left the care of the church of St Mary of the Angels, originally built in 1624 by Canon Giovanni Habel, to this newly-formed community which, since 1650, was based in a nearby oratory. On June 17, 1653, the same community was entrusted with the care of the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, originally built in 1611, on the *Grande Marina*.

St Mary of the Angels soon changed its name to *San Filippo*. The Oratorian Fathers became proprietors of a garden next to the church. Half of it was bought and the rest donated to them by Leone Abela in 1654. They established the oratory here, bought a house



The beautiful statue of the patron the Oratorians which was included in the façade while Senglea's oratory was being built.



A pre-war photograph showing the interior of the church dedicated to St Philip Neri in Vittoriosa.

The Oratorians in Malta

adjacent to it, and thus left their previously small and uncomfortable residence.

This church was immediately remodelled to cope with the needs of the Oratorians. From a description given in 1656 during the pastoral visitation of Bishop Balaguer, we are told of a new wooden tabernacle installed on the main stone altar. A wooden statue of St Philip with an inlaid relic was placed above the said tabernacle. The altarpiece, described as 'passable' in 1656 was, in 1714, replaced by another one painted by the most renowned Roman artist Andrea Sacchi and paid for by Dr Giuseppe Hebeier. It represented St Philip Neri in a kneeling position with St John the Baptist.

In 1737, a transept, a choir and a cupola were added to the church, thus changing its original quadrangular plan to a cruciform. However, this change proved to be inadequate, and was an eyesore in relation to the rest of the building. On September 20, 1771, Bishop Giovanni Pellerano granted permission to provost Don Lazzaro Camilleri to collect funds so as to build a new edifice, but work on it did not begin before 1779.

This hard-working and generous provost, who strove to reconstruct the whole church building, left all his personal property to the church and practically ensured the celebrations of all the feast days of the saints represented in this church. He also had the satisfaction of seeing the church consecrated by Bishop Vincenzo Labini on September 28, 1788.

In addition to Camilleri, it is worth referring to other provosts. Don Lorenzo Lanzon, apart from enriching the Vittoriosa parish archives with invaluable manuscripts, succeeded in his endeavours to have St Lawrence's parish raised to the honour of collegiate; Don Gian Battista Debono in 1821, was among the first canons of the Vittoriosa collegiate; and Don Ludovico Balzan was appointed archpriest of Vittoriosa in 1879.

The last provost was Don Antonio Pace. Due to poor health and exhaustion, he gave up the provosty on February 1, 1926. His successor, Don Giuseppe Glivau, is nowhere named provost but only referred to as 'administrator'.

During World War II, the church was slightly hit by enemy action, but has since been restored. A new street was opened at the back of the church, passing through what was formerly the sacristy, the convent and the remaining garden adjacent to the church.

In Senglea there was another Congregation of the Oratorians, on which, fortunately, there is more information. Similar to the one set up in Vittoriosa, this congregation also followed the rule of St Philip Neri without being part and parcel of the Philippine congregation.

On July 15, 1661, a group of six members of the clergy, all from Senglea, made a formal request to Bishop Balaguer expressing their desire to establish an oratory in their hometown under the rules set down by St Philip Neri, and following the example of the Vittoriosa community. This group consisted of three priests: Don Simone Schembri, Don Evangelista Gandolfo and Don Giuseppe Mifsud; two deacons: Don Giuseppe Lamagna and Don Horatio Mifsud; and subdeacon Don Federico Rispoli.

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For their own holiness and to be of service to the parishioners, they asked the bishop to allow them to take care of the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, together with the small house and a piece of land next to it. Eventually, after consulting Senglea's parish priest Don Francesco Azzopardi, the bishop gave his consent to their supplication. March 28, 1662, marked the beginning of the Oratorians of St Philip Neri in Senglea. The first provost was Don Simone Schembri, who was just 28 years old.

Led by Simone, they promised to expand the church and to give the house the character of a convent. In 1669, the house was demolished and a convent with a middle courtyard surrounded by an arcade in the form of a cloister, was built on the same

ground. The emerging Żebbug-born architect Petruzzi Debono was entrusted with this work. This is the same convent we can see today. While the convent was being built, the Oratorians decided to include a huge beautiful statue of their patron in the façade.

In 1670, they demolished the old church, originally built in 1596, and rebuilt it under the supervision of the Senglea-born architect Carlo Vella. Although the celebration in honour of Our Lady Porto Salvo was the titular feast of this church, people were most devoted to St Philip and, from all over Malta, they came to his altar to beg for some favour or to thank him for help received from God with his assistance.

The building of this church, which was designed in the shape of a Latin cross, lasted till 1690. One of the causes for this long wait was the plague of 1675-76 when 20 per cent of the Maltese population died. Throughout this calamity, the Oratorians, with so much zeal and charity, attended to the plague victims in Senglea. Their convent was also earmarked as the place for the seclusion of infected victims.

It is worth highlighting that despite being small in number and the tragic shocks, such as the plague, which could have easily wiped out the community, the Oratorians still succeeded to give a solid contribution to Senglea's inhabitants and bring about educational and cultural change.

Between 1795 and 1798, the convent of St Philip served as a place of detention for no less than 10 priests or clerics who were arrested by Mgr Giulio Carpegna (1793-1798), the last Inquisitor of Malta. Furthermore, during the first cholera epidemic, in June 1837, this same friary, and the church itself, served as a hospital, as the Central Hospital in Floriana had become overcrowded. Due to this situation the Governor of Malta, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Frederick Bouverie, ordered the Oratorians to leave the convent for a brief period.

Totally dependent on the diocesan bishop, many Oratorians of Senglea served the diocese as archpriests and parish priests. Among them was Don Vincenzo Cachia who, after being elected provost in 1787, was appointed as Senglea's second archpriest in 1800, and Don Paolo Le Brun, who in 1841 became first parish priest of Mellieha.

From among the Oratorians who formed part of the Senglea community, one cannot fail to mention provost Don Francesco Saverio Politano, who was consultant to the Inquisition; Don Francesco Saverio Baldacchino who, apart from being an early writer of prose and poetry in Maltese, was a much sought-after preacher; and Don Salvatore Gaffiero who was nominated titular bishop of Selymbria, consecrated on January 15, 1899, and served as Auxiliary Bishop of Malta until his death in 1906. Provosts Don Angelo Benedetto Psaila and Don Angelo Raggio were both famed for their saintliness.

Although renowned for their spiritual retreats, spiritual direction, confessions and preaching, for which they were in considerable demand, the Oratorians died a natural death due to lack of vocations. The last provost, Mgr Angelo Raggio, spent most of his life alone in the oratory until his death in 1928.

This scarcity of vocations was the reason why in 1907, the *frères* of St John Baptist de la Salle, faced with lack of space in their new school at *Strada Buongiorno*, Cospicua, asked to use the convent as a school. Archbishop Pietro Pace refused to approve their request as he believed the people deeply wished to have priests to provide them with liturgical services.

Finally, between 1943 and 1957, while Senglea parish church was being rebuilt after it was destroyed through enemy action during World War II, the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo temporarily acted as parish church.

In 1958, this church and St Philip's convent were entrusted to the care of a Jesuit community, and in 2008, they were commended to the Salesians.

While commemorating the 500th anniversary of the birth of this irresistibly attractive, so eminently lovable saint, it is noteworthy that the association of the Oratorians with the inhabitants of Vittoriosa and Senglea is still alive in people's minds. Their churches are still called 'of St Philip'.

On the other hand, although that of Senglea still functions, unfortunately we cannot the same for that of Vittoriosa. This was dishonoured and turned into a warehouse for the street decorations for the feast of the city's patron saint St Lawrence.