



Dear Oratorian Priests and Lay People!

1. I am pleased to extend a cordial welcome to each of you, participants in the General Congress of the Confederation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri. With this visit you wanted to renew your sincere devotion to the Vicar of Christ and full adherence to his Magisterium, in the spirit of your founder, who loved the Church with his whole being and left you his unreserved fidelity to the See of Peter as a legacy.

As I affectionately greet Fr. Antonio Rios Chavez, the Apostolic See's Delegate, I extend my cordial wishes to each of the congregations represented here at your General Congress and express my deep gratitude to them for the good they do, delighted as I am with the Oratory's growth in various parts of the world.

2. At the recent General Congresses your confederation, established by the Apostolic See to unite the individual Congregations of the Oratory in a bond of charity and mutual help, has undertaken to revise your constitutions along the lines suggested by the Church at the Second Vatican Council. At the dawn of the third Christian millennium your meeting plans to revisit, from a primarily pastoral standpoint, the sources of the spiritual movement that traces its origin to St Philip Neri, in order to respond faithfully to its perennial mission: to lead man to encounter Jesus Christ, "the Way, the Truth and the Life", truly present in the Church and the "contemporary" of every person.

This encounter, lived and proposed by St Philip Neri in an original and engaging way, makes us new persons in the mystery of Grace and instils in the soul that "Christian joy" which is the "hundredfold" given by Christ to those who welcome him into their lives. To encourage a personal meeting with Christ is also the fundamental "missionary method" of the Oratory. It consists in "speaking to the heart" of men and women in order to lead them to an experience of the divine Master that can transform lives. This is achieved especially by showing the beauty of such an encounter, which gives life its full meaning. Those who are "distant" must not be offered a theoretical proclamation, but the possibility of a truly renewed and thus joyful life.

This is the great legacy you received from your Father Philip! This pastoral way is always valid, because it belongs to the perennial Christian experience! I hope that the revisiting by your Congress of the sources of St Philip's spirituality and work will instil in each congregation a renewed awareness of the value and timeliness of your founder's "missionary method" and make a significant contribution to the task of the "new evangelization".

3. The Oratory was born of the faith and genius of St Philip Neri, who knew how to combine in a harmonious synthesis the charismatic dimension and full communion with the Pastors of the Church.

In the Rome of his time he also met the spiritual and material needs of young people with deep wisdom, exemplifying the joyful dimension of faith to the point that he was considered "the prophet of Christian joy". From the beginning, the Oratory has been a feature of your congregation, which takes its name from it, as the Bull *Copiosus in misericordia* by which Gregory XIII established it in the Holy Year of 1575 recalls. Born with the participation of secular priests, who came from the first experience of the Oratory, and put at its service, your congregation must continue to focus its concerns on this worthy institution with its original intentions, method and style, which are always adaptable to the needs of the times.

As the *Spiritual Journey* approved at the General Congress in 1994 recalls: "The specific aim and mission of the Congregation of the Oratory is the birth and growth of genuine Christian communities, the light and salt of the earth". These are presented in the very first articles of your Constitutions as a fraternal union of the faithful who, following in the footsteps of St Philip Neri, set as their goal what he taught and did, thus becoming "one heart and soul" (*Acts* 4: 32). They draw their inspiration from your Father Philip's example of simple family prayer meetings and spiritual talks with penitents and friends. In this perspective, the Oratory sees its identity in "the practice of discussing the Word of God together in a familiar way, as mental and vocal prayer, in order to foster a contemplative spirit in the faithful, as at a school, and the love of divine things".

I hope that the Oratory, by serving people with joy and simplicity of heart, will exemplify and spread this spiritual method in a more and more attractive and effective way. Thus it will be able to offer a consistent and incisive witness by fully living the fervour of its origins and offering our contemporaries an experience of fraternal life that is principally based on accepting and living the reality of supernatural communion in Christ.

"Those who want something other than Christ do not know what they want; those who ask for something other than Christ do not know what they are asking for; those who work but not for Christ do not know what they are doing". Your holy founder's words reveal the ever valid criterion for every renewal of the Christian community, which consists in returning to Jesus Christ: to his word, to his presence, to the saving action which he accomplishes in the Church's sacraments. This commitment will lead priests to give priority to the ministry of Confession and the spiritual guidance of the faithful, as is your tradition, in order to respond fully to your charism and to the Church's expectations. Thus they will help the lay people who belong to the secular Oratories to understand the essential value of being "*christifideles*", in the light of St Philip's experience: regarding the laity, he anticipated ideas and methods that would prove fruitful in the life of the Church.

4. Your congregations, faithful to the autonomy desired by their holy founder, are particularly linked to the reality of the particular Churches and to local situations. But the importance in the life of the communities and their members of the bond of fraternity with the other congregations that make up the Confederation must not be forgotten. It is through this bond that the characteristic autonomy of the individual houses is opened to the gift of active charity and the confederated communities find effective help to grow in fidelity to the Oratorian charism.

Let each congregation devote special care to the initial and continuing formation of individuals and communities, in order to assimilate the ideal passed on by St Philip and reposed by the Constitutions, for the sake of a growing spiritual vitality and effective apostolic presence.

In particular, I urge you to be guided by these values, especially in approaching the world of youth, which is full of promise despite the difficulties, and to feel that you have been especially sent to those who are "distant" but very close to the Saviour's Heart. In this regard, you will find great support in the traditional sensitivity of Oratorians to art and culture, which are particularly suitable ways for a significant evangelizing presence.

May the Virgin Mary, "Mother and Foundress of the Oratory", be for each of you the model who constantly inspires you to receive the gift of the Spirit with complete docility and to proclaim the joy of Christ to your brothers and sisters.

With these wishes, as I entrust you to the heavenly intercession of St Philip Neri, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to each of you and to the whole Confederation of the Oratory.