

REMINISCENCES: THE ORATORY OF ST. PHILIP NERI IN PITTSBURGH 1961-2016

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In Raleigh Addington's book *The Idea of the Oratory*, written a few years after the founding of the Oratory in Pittsburgh, he mentions that a Catholic newspaper stated that John Henry Newman's dream for Oxford was realized in Pittsburgh. The dream and unique idea of Newman, accomplished through the efforts of the eighth bishop of Pittsburgh, then-Bishop John Wright, was for a community of Oratorian priests to serve local college campuses. The Pittsburgh Oratory was the

first community of Oratorians invited into a Diocese to serve as campus ministers to secular universities, a unique aspect that Addington called an "interesting experiment"!

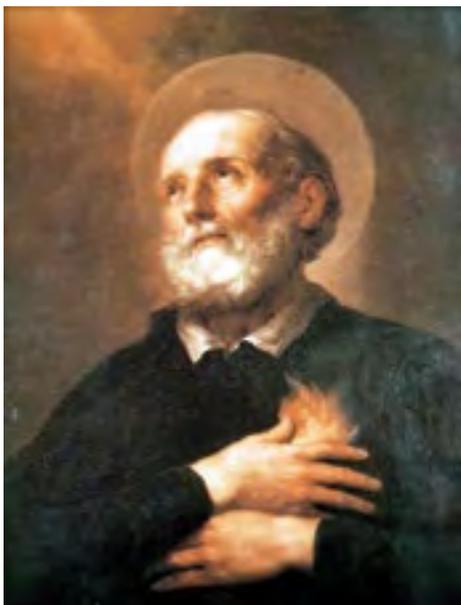
Now a little over fifty years since its founding, there are six Oratorian priests, a transitional deacon and two novices in formation. The priests serve the local campuses

and those who find a spiritual home at the Oratory. The campus ministry work is aided by the efforts of two teams of missionaries from the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS).



The Oratory, Oakland

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory



St. Philip Neri (1515-1595)

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

At the Pittsburgh Oratory, as in all Oratories throughout the world, a life is fostered that is patterned after that of the founder, Saint Philip Neri. St. Philip lived in a tumultuous time in the city of Rome. When he set about his work, founding a community was not his intention. St. Philip always considered the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the true founder of the Oratory.

Throughout his youth in Florence, Philip sought to eschew his father's and uncle's intention for him to enter into the family business. Under divine guidance he fled to Rome. There he lived a simple life and went about his work among the locals. At night, he was drawn to the quiet of deep prayer and meditation within the catacombs of St. Sebastian. During the day, he engaged in holy conversation on the streets with his fellow Roman citizens. At the age of 29, he had

a mystical experience of the Holy Spirit descending as a burning ball of fire, entering his heart and remaining deeply lodged there for the rest of his life. After his death, it was found that his heart was physically enlarged to such a degree that his ribs were cracked, providing room for his miraculous, palpitating heart.

A "delayed vocation" by the standards of his

day, St. Philip was ordained to the priesthood in 1551 at the age of 36, under obedience to his spiritual director. St. Philip was especially zealous for the sacrament of penance. His first group of penitents gave themselves up entirely to him, thus planting the first seeds of the future Oratory. St. Philip remains quite popular today in Rome. Along with St. Peter, he is acknowledged as the Apostle of Rome. He also has received the title of the Apostle of Christian Joy. Not only did Philip live a joyful life but he sought to encourage that charism in all of his disciples. Hence, the rationale behind his motto from Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again, I say rejoice."

In that spirit, Bishop Wright sought to found an Oratory in Pittsburgh. His deep devotion for Philip Neri and intimate knowledge of the life and writings of Blessed John Henry Newman, were the basis of this decision. Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) was an Anglican convert to Catholi-



Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890)

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

cism and a profound intellectual and spiritual guide. Named for Newman, the ministry centers at non-Catholic colleges and universities are called Newman Centers or Newman Clubs. Throughout his life, Newman was involved in education. His writings, especially *The Idea of a University*, were influential in Bishop Wright's decision to found an Oratory in Pittsburgh to do campus ministry at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. Together with Fr. John Walsh, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Bishop Wright initiated the foundation of this Oratory in 1961. At the time of its founding, the Newman movement on secular college campuses was also growing across the country. In Catholic universities and colleges, the campus ministry was provided by their own founding religious orders. After World War II, the G.I. Bill was bringing a lot of Catholics into the higher educational system, at Catholic universities and colleges, but even more so to secular universities.

In forming this new Oratory community, Bishop Wright also made contact with two priests — Father John Greene and Father John Ryan — from the Oratory in Rock Hill, South Carolina. The Oratory in Rock Hill was the first to be established in the United States in 1935 and was founded there by Bishop Emmet Michael Walsh to help with missions. Frs. Greene and Ryan met with Bishop Wright at a pub in Oxford, England and they were asked to come to Pittsburgh to join Father Walsh in the founding of a new Oratory.

When St. Philip Neri founded the Oratory, he desired that the men in community be bound by fraternal charity and common purpose rather than by the traditional religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, such as the Franciscans or Dominicans. When a man enters the Oratory, he does so with the intention of remaining there for his entire life. As secular priests, Oratorians promise obedience to the community and its elected provost. While there is intent to remain in one house for life, Oratorians are free to leave if they discern to do so. As an example, when Fr. Ryan and Fr. Greene returned from England, they went to the provost of the Rock Hill Oratory, told him of their conversation with Bishop Wright and of their decision to go to Pittsburgh to found a new Oratory. The provost in turn said he would propose the idea to the community, but the two had already made up their minds and left the next day.

Only recently did the current members of the Oratory in Pittsburgh learn of the early connection with the Rock Hill Oratory. In the early years of the Pittsburgh Oratory, Father Walsh went several times to visit Newman's Oratory in Birmingham, England. Since then, the Pittsburgh Oratory has always had strong ties with Birmingham. In fact, Fr. Walsh was at the Birmingham Oratory when news came that the Oratory could be founded in Pittsburgh. Standing in the refectory at the time he learned that the new community would be founded, he immediately knelt down and asked one of the priests for his blessing upon himself and the new community.

First House and Early Years

Bishop Wright requested the assistance of Mrs. Howard Hanna in obtaining a suitable location for priests who would be serving as campus ministers to the colleges. A house originally designed for the president of Carnegie Mellon University by Henry Hornbostel, a local architect with a national repertoire of buildings, served as

the first home of the Oratorians in Pittsburgh. In 1961, the young community moved into the house at 4040 Bigelow Boulevard, which was a large enough home that it could house many priests living there and was close in proximity to the universities. It was, however, somewhat psychologically removed from the two campuses and was inadequate in terms of office and meeting space as well as worship space. Heinz Memorial Chapel on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh and a small chapel in the basement of Tech House, campus housing designated for Catholic students at CMU, served as the places for worship. Bishop Wright also offered the Oratorians the use of Synod Hall next to St. Paul Cathedral. Situated between the two campuses, the original plan, although never realized, was to have a telephone installed on the outside door of Synod Hall so that any time a student wanted to speak with an Oratorian chaplain, they could pick up the phone and a priest would walk down to meet them.

As a proposed Oratory community is being formed, the same men have to live in community for multiple years with some stability. The Holy See ultimately governs when and how a house is established. Therefore, in the early years of formation, a house remains closely tied with the Bishop who invites the community into his Diocese. Shortly following the establishment of the house in Pittsburgh, the Second Vatican Council began in Rome causing a lot of turmoil and transition. This affected the stability of the young community. The two priests who came from Rock Hill, South Carolina, left the community and the priesthood, thus ending the line of connection with that Oratory.

During this time, Fr. Walsh and a few other scholarly priests known to Wright were living together in the Bigelow house. Unfortunately, there was a large turnover of individuals. It was not until 1968 that the young community had stabilized. The Holy See then favorably granted Pittsburgh permission to be included as an autonomous pontifical house of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. Prior to this, Fr. Walsh was the *de facto* leader and, though not elected, was appointed by Bishop Wright. At that time, Pittsburgh was one of only 37 or 38 Oratories in the world and the second one established in the United States. Another house was also founded from the Rock Hill Oratory in a very small village of Arizona named Yarnell and eventually the priests who were associated there founded the house in Monterey, California. Subsequently, another house was founded in Pharr, Texas.

Bishop Wright continued to meet with individuals who were interested in the community or who were interested in providing support. A significant figure in Catholic intellectual circles in the United States, William Clancy, was in communication with Bishop Wright about the Oratory. Clancy, who was not a priest at the time, was the editor of *Commonweal* magazine and the religion editor for *Newsweek*, both nationally notable positions. Bishop Wright asked Clancy to come to Pittsburgh to join the Oratory and when he agreed, he was sent to the Birmingham Oratory to complete a novitiate and to study some theology at Oxford prior to being ordained. As editor of national publications, Clancy was familiar with contemporary Catholic thought and already possessed a deep knowledge of topics

ranging from scripture and patristics to medieval theology and reformation history. Cardinal Wright ordained Father William Clancy in 1964 at Heinz Chapel on the University of Pittsburgh campus.

Once an Oratory is established as a pontifical house and internal governance is no longer under the auspices of the Diocesan Bishop, leaders can be elected within the community. At the first election, Father Clancy was voted to become Provost and would remain so until his death in 1982. When the Holy See granted permission for the Pittsburgh Oratory to be a pontifical house, Bishop Wright also founded a University parish that had no boundaries, the first ever in the Universal Church. The parish encompassed those who were interested in the Oratory, campus ministry, education and the Catholic sense of intellectual life. Initially, Bishop Wright asked about ten to twelve families to help found the new parish, known as the University Oratory of the Holy Spirit Parish. This emphasized both Cardinal Newman's and St. Philip's connection to the spirituality of the Holy Spirit. Many of the families involved in the early days of the parish were also instrumental in future growth, from fundraising for the new building to the founding and building of the National Institute for Newman Studies.

Rednal Retreat House in Ligonier

In early 1967, Fr. Walsh also began to look for a place outside of the city where the priests could occasionally spend a day of recreation and recollection. It would also be an excellent place to take the



Original Rednal Retreat House (mid 1980s)

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

university students for weekend retreats. The Church has always enjoyed the exercise of retreats. This provides quiet time for reflecting upon and sharing experiences of Catholicism. A farm in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, was found to be a suitable place to realize Fr. Walsh's dream. Situated on 87.6 acres, it had a farmhouse and a barn, both of which were decently sized, but not overly large. The property was large enough that a group of students could enjoy retreats without disruption to any of the neighbors.

After finding this suitable property, Fr. Walsh had lunch with three kindly disposed women and proposed that the farm in Ligonier

would be great for the students as well as for the Fathers and asked for their support. Since he had previously asked them for financial assistance, they offered to provide half of the purchase price of the farm which could be leveraged to garner a mortgage for the remaining costs. However, their offer came with one condition – that Fr. Walsh never ask them for money again! He readily accepted! Out of devotion to Newman, Fr. Walsh named the new property Rednal, the very name of Newman's own retreat house at the Birmingham Oratory. The black hills area outside Birmingham where the house is located is known as Redden Hall. Hearing the words "Redden Hall" pronounced with the accent of the locals transformed it into "Rednal." Their Rednal was similarly a place for the Fathers to recreate and recollect. It is also the site of the community's burial ground. In fact, there is a saying amongst the members, "if a father doesn't go to Rednal during his life, he won't spend his rest there for eternity." The idea being, priests need time away from the community and ministry to be better priests and perfected Oratorians. Newman was laid to rest there on August 11, 1890 and remained there until his bodily relics were moved and enshrined at an altar in the Birmingham Oratory.

In the early years following the purchase of the farm in Ligonier, students would aid the Fathers with some renovations and work on the property. It remained a fairly primitive farmhouse with small, chopped up rooms and just one small room designated as a chapel. Only 8-10 students, with a chaplain, could be there at a time. While it was expected to only take ten years to pay off the mortgage, there was an unanticipated balloon payment that left a portion unpaid and required refinancing. Maintaining Rednal in those early years took a lot of energy and work on the part of the students and the Oratorians. Once the mortgage was paid off in the mid-1980's, resources could then be put toward much needed repairs. Since the property had been unmanaged, heavy brush infested most of the once open fields. The priests and students spent years reclaiming the property. One student even spent several of his summers with a tractor and brush hog beating back the invasive multiflora rose! About two-thirds of the original fields from the time it was a dairy farm have been re-opened. Over the years, with successive renovations and additions, Rednal can now provide comfortable space for thirty-six retreatants. Presently, work has commenced upon a road to the top of the mountain and plans are in place for an outdoor Stations of the Cross. The Stations will be in memory of David S. Abernethy, Sr., the father of Fr. David Abernethy, C.O., who passed away in early 2016. Future plans may include an apiary for the bees under Fr. Joshua Kibler's watchful care. The fields may be planted with clover and wildflowers to enhance Rednal's visual aesthetic and supply the needs of the bees.

Growing Community and New Home

Not long after the founding of the Oratory, the community experienced difficulties. Fr. Walsh moved to Carnegie Mellon where he continued a ministry to students. Ultimately, he did decide to leave the Oratory and Pittsburgh in the early 1970's. Several other priests came to assist Fr. Clancy with the work of campus ministry. Br. Tim Philips, a member of the Marianist community, worked part-time as a campus minister. In 1976, Sr. Bernadette Young from the Sisters of Divine Providence, came on staff as a full-time campus minister.



Donnelly Chapel of St. Philip Neri at Christmas

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

Sr. Bernadette had a Ph.D. in education and served the university communities beautifully for decades. The community was also lovingly served by Mrs. Nancy Cira as secretary, and the cook and house mother was the beloved Sophie Kavnanek. Throughout these years, many Oratorians faithfully served the campus ministry including, Fr. Chris Kennedy, Fr. Eugene Green, Fr. Dennis Bradley, Fr. Nicholas Diprospero, Fr. Bryan Summers and Fr. Robert English. After Fr. Clancy's death in 1982, Fr. Bryan Summers was elected the second provost of the community and served for twenty-one years.

In 1978, a Pitt freshman, Drew Morgan, encountered the campus ministry of the Oratorians when he first arrived in Pittsburgh. At the time there were three Oratorians in residence, Fr. Clancy, Fr. Summers and Fr. English. Fr. Summers was an Anglican convert from Toronto who encountered the Oratory early in his conversion. Fr. English was a graduate student at Pitt who, through the ministry, encountered the community and became one of its priests. Fr. Drew came to live at the Oratory in February of 1979. He continued with seminary and theological studies at the University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, returning to be ordained a priest in May of 1985. Shortly thereafter, another Pitt student and a convert to Catholicism, David Abernethy, moved in to the house to discern a call to the priesthood and the Oratorian way of life. Following completion of his undergraduate degree and seminary studies at St. Vincent seminary in Latrobe, he was ordained to the priesthood in January of 1994.

As the ministry grew and developed and the number of students attending the programs increased, it became apparent that the house at 4040 Bigelow would not be able to sustain both the campus ministry and the growing Oratorian community. Providentially, an empty lot on Bayard Street became available. The generosity of benefactors allowed the Oratorians to purchase the property and to begin plans for a new building. A conceptual design was created that allowed for a suitable worship space, sufficient living quarters and ample facilities for student activities.

An Oratory building committee undertook both design for the new building and necessary funding. These efforts were aided particularly through the work of Tom Donnelly, Ruth (Donnelly) Egler and Catharine Ryan. For the Donnelly family, providing the funds for the chapel was particularly poignant. Ruth and Tom's brother, William R. Donnelly was tragically killed in a car accident on the corner of this lot at the young age of 18. The family requested

that the chapel be dedicated in his memory. While he lost his life prior to starting college, the chapel bearing his name is the very place where many students come to worship, experience deepening conversion and grow in their relationship with God.

A local architect and friend of the Oratory, David Vater, designed the Oratory building. Opened in November of 1994, the Tudor-style building appears as though it has been here for much longer. The upper floors are cloistered residential space for the priests. The lower floor is dedicated space for student activities with a large conference room, library and game room. The main floor includes a reception area, offices for the priests and staff and the William R. Donnelly Chapel of St. Philip Neri.

Founding of the National Institute for Newman Studies

Blessed John Henry Newman is regarded as one of the great minds of the Church and was a prolific writer in the fields of theology, philosophy and education. His scholarly works are a significant force shaping the religious thought of his time and now into the 21st century. He is known as the "Invisible Father" of the Second Vatican Council because his writings and ideas energized much of the deliberation and its outcome.



National Institute for Newman Studies, Oakland

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

Fr. Drew completed and defended his doctoral dissertation on Newman's writings on conscience in 1997. He was subsequently introduced to a scholarly community called the Venerable John Henry Newman Association. The Newman Association holds a yearly conference for presentations of papers related to Newman from piety and devotions to academic studies of his writings. Fr. Vincent Giese from the Archdiocese of Chicago was a founding member of that Association. He was known to have an extensive collection of Newman's works. He made these available for scholars as well as those who wanted to study various aspects of Newman's life and writings. When Fr. Giese passed away in 2000, he left a bequest of his library of about 600 books to the Newman Association.

The idea of making this collection available in a research library developed in the minds of Fr. Drew and Catharine Ryan, a great friend of The Oratory. The library would have a strong digital component, a Newman scholarship program and would publish a peer-reviewed journal. The scholarship program would provide generous grants for scholars to stay at the Institute for study. The peer-reviewed journal would



Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, Pittsburgh:
 (L to R, back row) **Fr. Stephen Lowery, C.O., Fr. David Abernethy, C.O.,
 Fr. Drew Morgan, C.O., Fr. Michael Darcy, C.O., Fr. Joshua Kibler, C.O.,**
 (L to R, front row) **Br. Reed Frey, C.O., Br. Thomas Skamai, C.O.,
 Deacon Peter Gruber, C.O., Fr. Paul Werley, C.O**

Source: Pittsburgh Oratory

include articles written by the scholars and also from the annual conference of the Newman Association. The first home of the library was a small office space in The Bristol apartment building directly behind the Oratory. Temporary occupancy of the space was made possible through a generous donation of Newman-devotees and long-time friends of The Oratory, Henry and Mary Louise Gailliot. Fr. Giese's books now had a new home.

In an effort to make the works of Newman more widely available, the work of digitizing his writings for a searchable database began immediately. This work was undertaken by Monty and his brother Art Crivella, owner of Crivella/West (creators of the Newman Knowledge Kiosk). In cooperation with The Birmingham Oratory, the digitization of Newman's handwritten archive has been completed with 238,000 images. Both the digital archive and the digital library of Newman works constitute the largest collection of his works in the world, equaled only by his own library and archive in Birmingham, England.

The Newman Library was housed at The Bristol for five years when two lots became available near the Oratory on N. Dithridge Street. Through generous donations, the Gailliot Center for Newman Studies, which houses the National Institute for Newman Studies, was opened in 2007. The building is home to the library collection featuring both primary and secondary Newman-related works, administrative offices and four residential suites for visiting scholars.

From this facility is published the *Newman Studies Journal*.

Nearing Capacity

The current residence on Bayard Street, four times larger than the original house on Bigelow Boulevard, was built to house a maximum of ten Oratorians. When the building opened in 1994, there were five full members of the community. Reaching the capacity of the new building (that is, doubling the size of the community) seemed like an unimaginable dream. However, the Bayard house presently has only one vacant room. In 1997, Michael Darcy, a graduate of SUNY-Binghamton, visited the Oratory and subsequently became a member. After seminary studies at St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, he was ordained to the priesthood in 2002. Joshua Kibler and Stephen Lowery both studied at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary before coming to the Oratory in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Both were ordained to the priesthood in 2009. Paul Werley, a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and a Marine veteran of the Iraq war, entered the community in 2008. Peter Gruber, also a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, became a member of The Oratory in 2010. In May of 2016, on the vigil of the feast of St. Philip Neri, Bishop Zubik ordained Fr. Paul Werley to the priesthood and Deacon Peter Gruber to the transitional diaconate. Deacon Peter will be ordained to the priesthood in May of 2017. Two additional men began their novitiates in 2016, Br. Reed Frey in January and Br. Thomas Skamai in May.

Campus Ministry and Secular Oratory

Today, the Oratorian priests are active with a bustling schedule of Masses, confessions, Bible studies, counseling and spiritual direction. Each year is punctuated with retreats, service projects, pilgrimages, dinners and dances. Two teams of missionaries from the Fellowship of Catholic University Students assist in the work of campus ministry. As recent college graduates, missionaries commit themselves to serving on college campuses, mentoring students and helping them to live out the universal call to holiness. Through the FOCUS teams, and the students they mentor, seventy-five Bible studies occur weekly on the local campuses.

Our beloved founder, St. Philip Neri, desired that all Oratories undertake their ministerial work within what is known as the “Secular Oratory.” Membership in this association allows the laity to enter deeply into the spiritual and liturgical life of the Oratory. Originally, the Oratory was not a religious house or community of priests, but a group of laymen gathered for prayer, spiritual reading, conversation, recreation and the care of those in need. The Oratory was not particularly dramatic or demanding. St. Philip desired simply to bring his friends to Christ. As friends, collectively drawn by the holiness of St. Philip, Secular Oratorians learned how to make progress in knowing and loving the Lord.

At the Pittsburgh Oratory, there are both monthly and weekly gatherings for the Secular Oratory. On Wednesday mornings, a Bible study reviews the upcoming Sunday readings. This has proven to be valuable preparation for participation in the Sunday liturgies. On Wednesday evenings, a group meets to examine Ancient Christian Writers. Through the years, the group has read, prayed and reflected

on the writings of great spiritual masters, including St. John Casian and St. John Climacus. Other Secular Oratory programs meet monthly. *Schola Christi*, or The School of Christ, gathers to study and reflect on different aspects of the Christian life. The Daughters of St. Philip Neri are dedicated to the spiritual motherhood of priests. Devotionally, the Secular Oratory worships in the Donnelly Chapel for the First Friday Vigils. Additionally, in the penitential spirit of St. Philip, the Oratorian priests make themselves available on a daily basis to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confessions, as well as spiritual counsel, are also offered with appointments by each of the Oratorian priests.

The work of campus ministry, the life of the Oratorians and the spirituality of the Secular Oratory is fortified and enhanced by Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration. While adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament has long been a part of the life at the Oratory, in 2008, Bishop Zubik granted permission to increase to a schedule of perpetual adoration. Except for scheduled Masses and a brief time for cleaning the chapel, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for Adoration at all times. Adorers commit to being present for one hour on the same day each week, thus allowing this devotion to be made available to the public.

The Pittsburgh Oratory will soon celebrate the 50th anniversary of its foundation as a pontifical house of the Confederation of Oratories throughout the world (1968-2018). With joy, the members hope to advance the dream of its many founders, to serve the local universities and all those attracted by the charism of St. Philip Neri and Blessed Newman.

Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, awarded its famed alumna, Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., its Elizabeth Seton Medal in 1986 in recognition of her work. The citation read in part:



The Elizabeth Seton Medal

Early in the 1930's the Maryknoll Sisters received a gifted Pittsburgh journalist. Some fifty years later, years of tireless work, reams of writing, and travels uncountable, Sister Maria del Rey, is still working, writing, and traveling.... So, with Elizabeth Seton – urged too by the charity of Christ – we can best “look up to the blue skies,” as she put it, “and the Lord of all of us will tell this great lady our reverence and our thankfulness.”