

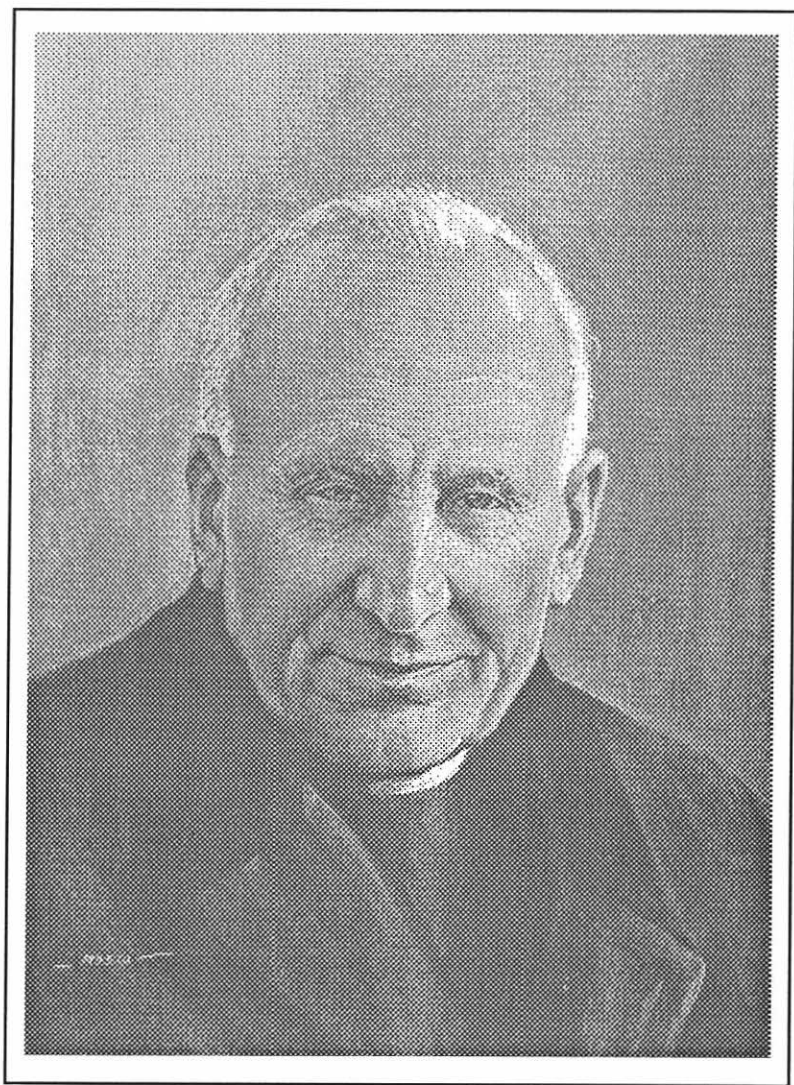
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Blessed Philip Rinaldi
(1856-1931)

Blessed Philip Rinaldi As I Knew Him

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“Our Guiding Star”

Father Philip Rinaldi was my granduncle on my father’s side. For us youngsters he was the tall, smiling priest who, when visiting our home, would dig into his pockets and invariably come up with all sorts of goodies. He was, as I remember, like a ray of sunshine, and his visits were always a feast. Later my twin brother, Paul, and I came to know him even better since, as students at the Salesian Oratory School in Turin, we lived close to him for nearly four years. When, in 1931, I was back in Turin as a seminarian at the Don Bosco International Institute, I was privileged to be with him during the last months of his life.

Somehow, I always felt that my father, who was named after Father Philip, was actually his favorite nephew. I was never more sure of this than when Dad, visiting with us boys at the Oratory School, took us along to meet Father Philip, who was then Superior General of the worldwide Salesian Order. Those visits, whether in his sparsely furnished office or small, unadorned bedroom, were always a treat. We were made to feel that we were indeed his family, and nothing that my father or we boys might say was ever unimportant to him. Father Philip knew our parents were struggling. They had twelve children, eight boys and four girls. I don’t think they ever made a move without taking his advice. “He was,” my father used to say, “our guiding star.”

The touch of Father Philip's guiding hand had been felt by our father very early in his life. At the age of sixteen, he had seriously thought of becoming a priest, and was, in fact, for nearly a year, a student at the Turin Salesian Seminary, of which Father Philip was then rector. One day, in a heart-to-heart talk, Father Philip said to him: "I am sending you home, Philip. Your father is not well and your mother needs you. The Lord has other plans for you. I am convinced the priesthood is not for you. Trust me, Philip. Someday you will know this was the right decision."

It was indeed! Who would have ever thought that, of the twelve children our parents were blessed with, five would enter the priesthood, and two would become nuns, members all of the Salesian family.

"You Know Where to Find Me"

Paul and I were nearly twelve years old when the day came for us to bid a sad farewell to our native village and to all it had meant to us: the warmth and joy of a happy family, and the carefree days in the open countryside.

Since the village did not provide schooling beyond the elementary grades, this meant going to the Salesian Oratory School in nearby Turin. The school was part of a large complex, actually the world center of the far-flung Salesian Order, headed at that time by Father Philip.

Everything seemed wonderfully exciting when we first arrived at the Oratory. Father took us immediately to meet Father Philip, who could hardly do enough so we might be comfortably settled at the school. "Now that you know where

my office and my room are," he told us after dad had left, "you know where to find me if there is anything you need."

As evening drew on, a growing feeling of homesickness began to tug at our hearts. By the time we got to the dormitory, I was almost in tears. I said to Paul, "We'll go to see Father Philip tomorrow, and I think I will tell him I want to go home." On the following day, we went looking for him. It did not take him long to realize we were two very homesick boys. Out came a box of chocolates from his desk drawer. He kept us spellbound with sparkling anecdotes of his early years with Don Bosco. His words and ways were balm to our hearts.

"How about serving my Mass at the Sisters' convent tomorrow morning?" he suggested. "There, across the square," he added, pointing to the building from the window. I will meet you in the lobby down stairs at 6:45. You can have breakfast at the convent after the Mass, and a good breakfast it will be. Now run along to play, and keep that smile on your face."

How could anyone be homesick for long with Father Philip around?

Paul and I spent four happy, unforgettable years at the Oratory. Study was a serious matter, but it was not all work and no play. The sports, the outings, the great fiestas, the stage performances, the joy-filled environment in which we lived, the way our Salesian teachers shared our life—everything was directed to make the school one happy family. And there was Father Philip. We saw him quite frequently since our assignment to serve his Mass at the convent had become permanent. He was like a father to us, but then he was a father with everyone: simple, warm-hearted, cordial, with a keen interest in the smallest details of our lives, always ready to listen to us, always encouraging.

I remember one day, as Paul and I came out of his office, we were met by a priest who had been secretary to St. John Bosco for some thirty years. "I don't think you really know your granduncle," he told us. "he is as nearly like Don Bosco as anyone could be."

"Then surely," Paul remarked, "Don Bosco must have been a very fine man!"

"Don Bosco," the priest concurred, "was not just a fine man. He was a saint! And so is Father Philip! "

"Do Not Grieve for Paul"

Paul and I went our separate ways in the fall of 1925. "I want to become a Salesian," he told me, "and the sooner the better."

I decided to join our two older brothers in the United States. Both Caesar and Louis were Salesians. Some years before, they had answered the call to join the Salesian Province there, in dire need of priests. I thought I, too, might eventually follow in their footsteps.

Leaving Paul and putting the ocean between us was a painful experience. We had been extremely close for all of our fifteen years. I leaned on him instinctively, and always took his goodness and strength for granted, just as I did his unquestioned superior achievements. On graduation day at the Oratory, he was awarded the highest honor, that of "top student," for unequalled excellence in conduct and study.

Little did I know when we parted some two months later that I would never see him again. He died a few days after our nineteenth birthday, just as he was reaching out for the priesthood with every ounce of energy in his soul.

I was shattered when word of his passing reached me in

New York. "Do not grieve for Paul," Father Philip wrote to me. "He lived and died like a saint. Imitate him, and pray that he may be your guide and inspiration as long as you live."

"You Have My Blessing"

Had it not been for Father Philip, I probably would have never come to America. Mother was dead set against it. "It's bad enough Caesar and Louis are so far away," she kept repeating to me. "You can't leave us, too... And how do you think Paul will feel? You are too young, anyway!" Father was not happy about it, either.

"Suppose we let Father Philip decide," I told them. "If he agrees I can go, then surely you should not object." Somewhat reluctantly, they agreed that I could seek his counsel.

Since he knew I was then living at home, he was rather surprised to find me one morning at the convent chapel in Turin. I served his Mass, after which he invited me to join him for breakfast, a perfect setting for our conversation.

"And what would you expect to do in America?" he calmly asked me after I broke the news to him.

"I would go to school, learn English, and maybe become a Salesian like Caesar and Louis."

The unmistakable fatherly expression on his face seemed to add a special significance to his words. "I can't think of any one reason why you should not go to America," he said. "You will be with your brothers. What do your parents think about it?"

"They agree I can go if you give me your blessing, uncle."

"Did you pray over your decision, Peter?"

"I have done so since I began to think about it, and did

it again this morning during Mass. Do I have your blessing?"
"You do, Peter."

His Letters

None of the letters I wrote to Father Philip ever remained unanswered. If anything, I am left with a lingering feeling of regret that, during the years of my Salesian formation in the United States, my letters to him were all too few and far between.

Never lengthy, always fatherly and encouraging, his replies bear a striking resemblance, in both style and content, to the letters Don Bosco wrote. Following are extracts of some of his letters:

I note with pleasure from your recent letter that you have donned the clerical habit. Congratulations! Dear Peter, you are now beginning an important phase of your Salesian formation. The religious habit should be a constant reminder to you that you are now "to put on Christ," and that you are to do so according to the spirit and the lifestyle of Don Bosco.

I have had your letter on my desk for quite some time, a reminder that I must write to you.

You tell me you are now assistant to the Master of Novices at Newton, N.J. Being in a position of responsibility can do wonders for your spiritual life, if you but exercise your authority with charity and humility.

I saw your mother recently. She looked fine, but complained that her sons in America should write to her more often. Do so, Peter. You do know a mother's heart.

You write to me that you are preparing for your final vows, and ask me what you must do to be a Salesian after Don Bosco's heart. You will be such if you seek only God in all you do, if you do not shy from work, if you are temperate, cheerful, tolerant of others, kind and patient with all.

I am looking forward to your return to Turin in July for your theology course, and so does everyone in the family.

In the fall of 1928, my brother Father Caesar was asked to take over the direction of the Salesian High School in New Rochelle, N.Y. "I am twenty-eight years old," he wrote to Father Philip. "I can't see myself as the superior of a large community in which many of the confreres are older than I." Father Philip's reply follows:

You tell me you are too young to be the superior of the New Rochelle community. I, too, was your age when Don Bosco appointed me director, and know exactly how you feel. But let me tell you that you are going to New Rochelle not as a superior, but as a friend, a brother, a father...

Realize, too, that your appointment is proof that your superiors trust you... Have confidence in the Lord, and a bit of confidence in yourself, too... I will be looking for a letter from you, dear Caesar, that will let me know that you will try to see it all in this light.

To a niece who turned to Father Philip for advice when faced with her first assignment as superior of a community of Salesian Sisters, he replied:

Your number one task is to safeguard the family spirit in the community. Your role as superior is to radiate calm, serenity and cheerfulness. God help a Salesian community ruled over by a gloomy, grumpy superior who wears her authority like a porcupine wears its sharp quills.

Be careful not to invoke the rule at every turn, or worse, to use it as a sort of whip. A Salesian superior must govern with the heart, not with the rule. It is the heart that makes us love the rule... On with courage, dear Sister Maria! And if we must suffer in the process, let us remember that the price we have to pay for our ticket to heaven is never too high.

As in all his contacts with people, in his letters, too, does Father Rinaldi stand revealed for what he truly was: always and above all a father.

Random Notes from an Old Diary

August 15, 1931—Today I arrived in Turin to begin my Theology course. I had left the city nearly six years ago for the United States. I was then barely fifteen years old. I am not surprised that hardly anyone knows me anymore. Even Father Philip at first wondered.

“Is it really you, Peter?” he asked me as he pressed his cheek to mine. He then stood looking at me for a few seconds. “No,” he said, “this tall young American can’t be the little altar boy I once knew.”

Dear old Uncle! He looks so much older. He is ailing, too. But he is as fatherly and as cordial as ever. His secretary warned me before he admitted me to his room, “Not more than fifteen minutes. Doctor’s orders!”

He kept me for one hour, and was all questions about my brothers in America and our Salesian work there. His eyes grew misty when he talked about Paul. I told him I was on my way to our village to see the family.

“Give them my love,” he said. And he added, “Peter, be grateful for your family. Do you realize how blessed you are?”

“You had a lot to do with those blessings, Uncle,” I replied.

“Not I, Peter. The Lord did.”

September 27, 1931—I am now settled at the Don Bosco International Institute of Theology in Turin, with nearly three hundred students from almost every country in the world. What splendid young Salesians! And what a

faculty! To think I will be here for four years, and will leave the place as a priest! To know that I am not far from Father Philip, and that I'll be able to see him often!

December 5, 1931—Father Philip died suddenly this morning at 10:30. I rushed to the Oratory. He was still seated in his armchair where he had expired, his head slightly bent as if he were asleep. I was amazed to see the Cardinal-Archbishop of Turin kneeling in prayer at his side. As I knelt, too, unable to restrain my tears, the good cardinal placed his hand on my shoulder. "Do not weep," he said. "He was a saint, like Don Bosco."

Just three days before he died, I had gone up to his room, hoping I could see him. Brother infirmarian refused to admit me. Two days later, I received a note from Father Philip. "Dear Peter," he wrote, "I understand Brother did not allow you to see me. He must obey the doctors, and so must I. Drop me a line if you think there is anything I can do for you. Best wishes for your studies. Keep me in your prayers. You are in mine.—Your uncle, Father Philip"

December 8, 1931—Nearly two hundred thousand persons have filed past Father Philip's bier during the past three days. Today, as many have lined Turin's main boulevard for the funeral procession. The Oratory will never be the same without him, not for me anyway.

“An Altar in My Heart”

Ever since Father Philip was beatified, I have had to reply to any number of questions from friends as well as from strangers. Two questions are particularly relevant: “Did you, did people who knew Father Philip think he was a saint?” And, “How did you feel when Pope John Paul II raised him to the honors of the altars and declared him ‘blessed’?”

It is easier to sense a person’s holiness than to define it. Holiness is a reflection of God’s own goodness. Father Philip’s transparent goodness stood revealed to all who approached him, in his warm personality, his gentleness, and his fatherly concern for people. Most of them were aware of his extraordinary ability as a leader, but not many knew that these character traits were rooted in a soul intimately united with God. Like St. Francis de Sales, whom he so admired, Father Philip “lived Christ, loved and acted with the heart of Christ.”

How did I feel when “Uncle Father Philip” was raised to the honors of the altars? Immensely grateful to the Lord. As I was concelebrating Mass with the Holy Father in St. Peter’s Square on that memorable Sunday, April 29, 1990, it occurred to me that, in a way, Father Philip had an altar in my heart ever since I knew him. Suddenly I found myself thinking of the note he wrote to me two days before he died. “Dear Peter,” he wrote, “let me know if there is anything I can do for you...”

“Father Philip,” I prayed, “at this point in my life, there is but one thing I ask of you: When the Lord calls me, take me by the hand as you used to do when I was a child, and lead me to Him.”