

# Saint Philip Benizi

## Confessor and Servite Saint.

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Saint Philip Benizi was born in Florence, Italy in the thirteenth century. He entered the Servite Order and was subsequently ordained a priest. In 1267, he was elected prior general and remained in office almost until his death. He served with wisdom, developed excellent laws, and fought to keep the Order from being suppressed. Recognized for his holiness, he attracted many to enter religious life and follow his example of Gospel values and the service of Mary. Because of his strong influence, he has been considered a "father of the Order." He died in 1285 and was canonized in 1671. His feast is celebrated on August 23rd.

Died a.d. 1285.

THIS principal ornament and propagator of the religious order of the Servites in Italy was of the noble families of Benizi and Frescobaldi in Florence, and a native of that city. He was born on August 15, in the year 1233, which is said by some to be the very feast of the Assumption on which the seven Founders of the Servites had their first vision of our Lady. His parents, Giacomo and Albaverde, had been long married but childless, and Philip was a child of prayer. Through their care, assisted by grace, Philip preserved his soul untainted by vice and the world, and daily advanced in the fear of God. At the age of thirteen, having gone through preliminary studies in his own country, he was sent to Paris to apply himself to the study of medicine, in which charity was his motive; and the writings of Galen, though a heathen of the second century, was a strong spur to him in raising his heart continually from the contemplation of nature to the worship and praise of its Author. From Paris he travelled to Padua, where he pursued the same studies, and took the degree of doctor in medicine and philosophy at the age of nineteen. After his return to Florence, he took some time to deliberate with himself what course to steer, earnestly begging God to direct him into the path in which he should most perfectly fulfill His will. For a year, he practiced his profession, spending his leisure time in the study of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers and in prayer for guidance, especially before a certain crucifix in the abbey-church at Fiesole and before a picture of the Annunciation in the Servite chapel at Carfaggio, just outside the walls of Florence.

At this time, the Servites, or Order of the Servants of Mary, had been established fourteen years, having been founded by seven gentlemen of Florence as described under their feast on February 12, but had not yet been officially recognized by the Holy See. (Note that their feast-day is now February 17.) At their principal house on Monte Senario, six miles from Florence, they lived in little cells, something like the hermits of Camaldoli, possessing nothing but in common, and professing obedience to Saint Buonfiglio Monaldi, one of the founders. The austerities, which they practiced, were great, and they lived mostly on alms; Saint Buonfiglio was the first superior of this company.

On the Thursday in Easter Week, 1254, Philip was in prayer at Fiesole when the figure on the crucifix seemed to say to him, 'Go to the high hill where the servants of My Mother are living, and you will be doing the will of My Father'. Pondering these words deeply Philip went to the chapel at Carfaggio to assist at Mass, and was strongly affected with the words of the Holy Ghost to the deacon Philip, which were read in the epistle, or first reading of that day, 'Go near and join yourself to this chariot.' His name being Philip he applied to himself these words as an invitation to put himself under the care of the Blessed Virgin in that order, and he seemed to himself, in a dream or vision, to be in a vast wilderness (representing the world) full of precipices, rocks, flint-stones, briars, snares, and venomous serpents, so that he did not see how it was possible for him to escape so many dangers. Whilst he was thus in dread and consternation he thought he beheld Our Lady approaching him in a chariot and about to speak to him, but he was recalled to his surroundings by Saint Alexis Falconieri, another of the founders, who, thinking he was asleep, had shaken him by the shoulder. 'God forgive you, Brother Alexis,' said Philip. 'You have brought me back from Paradise.' But that night the vision was repeated and our Lady called him to her new order.

Reflecting that great watchfulness and an extraordinary grace are requisite to discover every lurking rock or quicksand in the course of life in the world, and persuaded that God called him to this order as to a place of refuge, he went to Monte Senario and was admitted by Saint Buonfiglio to the habit as a lay-brother, that state being more agreeable to his humility. 'I wish,' he said, 'to be the servant of the Servants of Mary.' In consideration of the circumstances in which he had joined the order, he retained his baptismal name in religion. He began his novitiate at Carfaggio but was afterwards sent back to Monte Senario, where he was made gardener and put to work at every kind of hard country labor. The saint cheerfully applied himself to it in a spirit of penance and accompanied his work with constant recollection and prayer; he lived in a little cave behind the church where, in ecstasies of divine love, he often forgot the care that he owed to his body. He concealed his learning and talents until they were at length discovered; but those who conversed with him admired the prudence and light with which he spoke on spiritual things. He was sent in 1258 to the Servite house at Siena and on the way there, he un-designedly displayed his abilities in a discourse on certain controverted points, in the presence of two learned Dominicans and others, to the great astonishment of those that heard him, and especially of his companion, Brother Victor.

The matter was reported to the prior general, who examined Saint Philip closely and then had him promoted to holy orders, though nothing but an absolute command could extort his consent to such a step. He was ordained by the Bishop of Florence on Holy Saturday in 1259 but did not say his first Mass until the following Pentecost.

All Philip's hopes of living out his life in quiet and obscurity, serving God and his brethren as a lay-brother, were now at an end. He was appointed assistant to Saint Buonfiglio, who had retired from the generalate and been made colleague to his successor, Saint Manettus, again one of the saintly founders, which involved travelling about with him throughout Tuscany, Umbria, Emilia, and Lombardy, visiting the houses of the order. Buonfiglio died in 1261 and Saint Philip thereupon went to the Siena monastery as novice-master. He filled this congenial office for only eighteen months, being taken from it to be one of the four vicars appointed by the chapter to assist the prior general; soon after he became himself colleague of the prior general. In 1267, a chapter of the whole order (which had been in effect recognized by Pope Alexander IV eight years before) was held at Carfaggio; at this chapter, Saint Manettus resigned the generalship and, in spite of his protests, Saint Philip Benizi was unanimously elected in his stead.

During his first year of office, he made a general visitation of the provinces of northern Italy, which at the time were torn and distracted by the strife of Guelf and Ghibelline, strife between political supporters of the Papacy and the 'Holy Roman' Emperor respectively. It was on this tour that his first miracle was reported of him, very similar to one attributed to Saint Dominic and other saints: owing to the troubles, the Servites of Arezzo were unable to get food and were on the verge of starvation; when they assembled for supper there was nothing to eat until, when Saint Philip had exhorted them to have faith and had prayed before our Lady's image in the church, a knock was heard at the monastery door and two large baskets of good bread were found on the steps. He codified the rules and constitutions of the Servite order and this work was confirmed by the general chapter held at Pistoia in 1268; afterwards he submitted them to Pope Clement IV at Viterbo and would on the same occasion have asked leave to give up his office. But he was so warmly dissuaded by his colleague, Brother Lottaringo, that he resigned himself to holding it so long as his brethren should wish, which proved to be for the rest of his life.

Upon the death of Clement IV, the conclave assembled at Viterbo early in 1269, and it was rumored that Cardinal Ottobuoni, protector of the Servites, had proposed Saint Philip to succeed him, and that the suggestion was well received. When word of this came to Philip's ears, he ran away and hid himself in a cave among the mountains near Radicofani, where he was looked after for three months by Brother Victor, until he deemed the danger past. (The cardinals were unable to agree and it was not until September 1271 that Theobald Visconti, Archdeacon of Liege, was elected as Gregory X.) During this retreat, Saint Philip rejoiced in an opportunity of giving himself up to contemplation; he lived chiefly on dry herbs, and drank at a fountain, since esteemed miraculous and called Saint Philip's bath, situated on a mountain named Montagnata. He returned from the desert glowing with zeal to kindle in the hearts of Christians the fire of divine love.

After the chapter at Florence at Whitsun (Pentecost) of the same year he appointed a vicar general there to govern his order and with two companions, Saint Sostenes and Saint Hugh, two more of the seven original founders, undertook an extensive mission, preaching with great fruit at Avignon, Toulouse, Paris, and in other great cities in France, and also in Flanders, Friesland, Saxony, and Higher Germany. He left Sostenes at Paris in charge of the scattered Servite houses of France, and proceeded to establish the order in Germany, where he deputed Hugh as vicar and gave him as assistant the neophyte Blessed John of Frankfort, who became one of the saint's most loved disciples. Philip visited Germany again in 1275 and 1282, but before that, he was summoned by Blessed Gregory X to be present at the second general council of Lyons. At it, he made a profound impression and the gift of tongues was attributed to him, but his reputation did not serve to obtain for the Servites that formal papal approbation for which Saint Philip worked continually. The Council in fact reiterated the decree of the fourth Council of the Lateran forbidding new religious orders, and the Servites were more than ever in danger of suppression till the death of Blessed Innocent V in 1276; even then the desired confirmation did not come till 1304, nineteen years after Philip's death.

The saint announced the word of God wherever he came and had an extraordinary talent in converting sinners and in reconciling those that were at variance. Italy was still horribly divided by discords and hereditary factions. Holy men often sought to apply remedies to these quarrels, which had a happy effect upon some; but in many, these discords, like a wound ill cured, broke out again with worse symptoms than ever. Papal Guelfs and imperial Ghibellines were the worst offenders, and in 1279, Pope Nicholas III gave special faculties to Cardinal Latino to deal with them. He

invoked the help of Saint Philip Benizi, who wonderfully pacified the factions when they were ready to tear each other to pieces at Pistoia, and other places. He succeeded at length also at Forli, but not without first exposing himself to many dangers. The seditious insulted and beat him in the city, but his patience at length disarmed their fury, and vanquished them. Peregrine Laziosi, who was their ringleader and had himself struck the saint, was so powerfully moved by the example of his meekness and sanctity that he threw himself at his feet and with tears begged his pardon and prayers. Being become a model penitent, he was received by him into the order of Servites at Siena in 1283, and continued his penance until his happy death in the eightieth year of his age. So evident were his holiness and perseverance that he was canonized by Benedict XIII in 1726.

Saint Philip made the sanctification of his religious brethren the primary object of his zeal, as it was the first part of his charge, and he attracted a number of notably good men to himself. Among them were Blessed John of Frankfort and Saint Peregrine, mentioned above; Blessed Joachim Piccolomini, who met Philip at Siena; Blessed Andrew (Andrea) Dotti, a soldier, and Blessed Jerome, both of Borgo San Sepolcro; Blessed Bonaventure of Pistoia, converted by a sermon of the saint from a life of violence and crime; Blessed Ubald of Florence (he was also from Borgo San Sepolcro originally), whose quarrelling had turned Florence upside down; and Blessed Francis Patrizi (of Siena). In 1284 Saint Alexis Falconieri put his niece Saint Juliana under the direction of Saint Philip, and from his advice to her sprang the third order regular of the Servants of Mary. He was also responsible for sending the first Servite missionaries to the East, where some penetrated to Tartary and there gave their blood for Christ. Throughout his eighteen years of generalship of his order, Philip had as his official colleague Lottaringo Stufa, whom he had known and loved from boyhood. They remained the closest friends and the utmost confidence subsisted between them; Philip made Lottaringo his vicar whenever he had to leave Italy, and was followed by him in the generalship. Their long association was an ideal partnership.

Four hundred years before the founder of the Trappists, Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé, the Abbot de Rancé, Saint Philip Benizi realized that a religious community in which regular discipline is weakened and those who profess the rule are strangers to its true spirit is not a harbor or place of refuge, but a shipwreck of souls. Scarce could a saint be able to resist such example or the poison of such an air, in which everyone is confined. Though gross crimes of the world are shut out, the want of the religious spirit and a neglect of the particular duties of that state are enough to damn souls. To preserve his family from so fatal a misfortune, he never ceased to watch and pray.

Judging at length by the decay of his health that the end of his life drew near, he set out in 1285 to make the visitation of the convents of his order and at Florence convened a general chapter at which he announced his approaching departure and handed over the government to Father Lottaringo. 'Love one another! Love one another! Love one another!' he adjured the friars, and so left them. He went to the smallest and poorest house of the order, at Todi, where he was enthusiastically received by the citizens, and when he could escape from them he went straight to the altar of Our Lady, and falling prostrate on the ground prayed with great fervor, and said, 'This is the place of my rest for ever'. He made a moving sermon on the glory of the blessed on the feast of the Assumption of the Mother of God, but at three o'clock in the afternoon of that day was taken seriously ill. He sent for the community, and again spoke of brotherly love 'Love one another, reverence one another, and bear with one another'. Seven days later the end came; he called for his 'book', by which word he meant his crucifix, and devoutly contemplating it, calmly died at the hour of the evening Angelus. The cultus of Saint Philip Benizi was confirmed for the whole Church by Pope Clement X in 1671.

