

**Homily given by The Right Reverend Mark Davies,
Bishop of Shrewsbury, at Mass to celebrate the First Anniversary of
the Parish of Saint Philip Neri, Birkenhead on 26 May 2021**



“May they all be one ... so the world may believe ...” (John 17: 21,22)

This was the final prayer of our Saviour as He went into His Passion; the prayer which accompanied the institution of the Eucharist. A prayer that we should be completely one in faith and life and so in our witness together. The people of Saint Joseph’s and Saint Michael’s have always been united in faith yet with Father Nick Kern and Father Chris Matthews’s leadership you have come together at this moment in history. Two parishes have become one not merely for better organisation rather to give greater witness so Birkenhead may believe.

Towns, even as great as Birkenhead, don’t come to believe as a civic entity rather by each soul, one by one, coming to share the faith of the Church. This is what your new patron, Saint Philip Neri shows us when he came as an ‘outsider’ to the great City of Rome and set in motion a new conversion of its people. Among the Roman population who no longer took the demands of faith seriously, Philip Neri would even be called the City’s “second Apostle” after Saint Peter himself. Such is your new patron whose prayer we ask tonight.

Saint Philip was what we might call in the North of England “a character” at once loveable and disconcerting. As a lay man and a priest, almost to the day he died, he would stop people with a smile and ask “*Ah, brother is it today that we’re going to do some good?*” and urge “*Live in God and die to self.*” In his last years, he would stand at the Altar for two hours and more following the words in preparation for Holy Communion “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof ...*” So overcome was he by the sheer wonder of the Eucharist. Yet, when he realised someone had received Holy Communion carelessly he was known to send two Altar Servers with lighted candles to walk beside of them through the streets to help them realise Who they had just received.

Yet, nothing Saint Philip did – however eccentric on the surface – was ever done to draw attention to himself, rather to draw all eyes to Christ the Lord and in order to hasten the conversion of every soul. He shows how souls are won to love of Christ first by our prayer, our persevering prayer for those in our families, our workplace, our neighbourhood; by our penance in the small sacrifices of each day offered with great love; and finally by our own gentle and sincere invitation. If Saint Philip's approach to souls was so put into practice, we would quickly see how a parish might double and treble in size year after year!

So it becomes clear why it was more than your Parish Priest's ordination anniversary that led me to choose this Saint as example and intercessor for the New Evangelisation of Birkenhead. Saint Philip's mission in Rome four centuries ago, was also bound-up with England. It was to Saint Philip, as an old man, the young priests would go seeking his blessing before setting out to face martyrdom in this land. It was an evangelising idea of Saint Philip in the form of 'Oratories' as centres of Eucharistic life, prayer, teaching and music – which would inspire Saint John Henry Newman at the beginning of the 'Second Spring' of the Catholic Church in this land. And in Birkenhead, we ask Saint Philip to once more extend his hand in blessing to us and all our efforts for the new evangelisation of this town.

If 'Saint Philip Neri's Parish' still sounds a little unfamiliar then we might recall a startling moment in Confirmation when the bishop addresses the candidate for the first time by a new name. The candidates continue to be recognised by their Baptismal names yet from this moment a new Saint and Intercessor is given for a new stage in the Christian life and mission. The great churches of Saint Joseph and Saint Michael and All Angels will retain their names, identities and their great protectors in Heaven. Yet, as you come together as one community in renewed mission together you gain a new Saint and intercessor in Heaven.

This evening, my own prayer for you is that the joy which filled the heart of Saint Philip Neri will be the hallmark of the whole life and mission of your parish. The Apostle Paul reminds us, how the source of this unfailing and infectious joy is to be found not merely in a sunny temperament rather in knowing that the Lord is always very near. The recognition of His Presence in the Holy Eucharist as the living heart of your parish. In this way, may Saint Philip Neri's Parish, always rejoice!