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Retreat for the Priests of the Diocese of Lincoln
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Sir 35:1-12, Ps 50, Mk 10:28-31

- “We have given up everything to follow you,” St. Peter says to Jesus in today’s Gospel. In St. Matthew’s account, he adds, “What will there be for us?” This is a poignant conversation into which to enter over the course of a retreat because many times we can begin to feel like Peter and the apostle. They had just witnessed the Rich Young Man walk away sad because he wasn’t willing to trade heavenly wealth for earthly riches, to sell what he had and give the proceeds to the poor in order to follow Jesus along the path of giving one’s life to proclaim the Gospel to the poor. His example of human caution, of seemingly prudent limits to following God, of staying at the level of not breaking the commandments but not paying the price of following perfection, likely led the apostles to wonder whether they had been crazy in having made the sacrifices they had to follow Jesus, leaving the biggest catch of fish in the life behind, along with their nets, their boats, their families, their hometowns and so much more. If Jesus implied that just keeping the second tablet of the Decalogue was enough to inherit eternal life, was it even necessary to seek perfection, to divest ourselves of what they had to follow Jesus with all their mind, heart, soul and strength?
- But rather than console them, Jesus disturbed them, saying that basically it was humanly impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven, humanly impossible to become perfect. “Children,” Jesus said, “How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Such a statement provoked them at the point of despair to ask, “Who, then, can be saved?” And Jesus’ response, “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God,” wasn’t particularly consoling. Yes, God can work a miracle, but can they count on his working that miracle for them. That’s why Peter, with his courage, asked the question. He said that, unlike the Rich Young Man, they had left everything, their possessions and their family, behind, and he wanted to know whether God would do the impossible for them and secure their salvation. Jesus at this point consoled them, swore an oath and said, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.” Likewise today, we can ask, “Is it worth it, Jesus?” Is my priestly life worth it? I’ve given up marital love and intimacy, the joy of a family of my own. I’ve given up great money-making prospects in the world, the possibility of owning the types of cars I’d prefer, houses and property and vacation homes and so much more. I’ve forsaken the ability to determine my future, entrusting myself to others to determine what assignments I’ll take on. Vale la pena? Is it worth it? Today Jesus describes the payoff. He swears an oath. And he asks us to stake our whole life on his promise. That we will receive 100 fold in this life, eternal life, and the grace of persecutions to help us grow in faith and cling to Jesus all the more as our supreme good, our pearl of great price, our portion and our cup. Jesus is saying that the sacrifices we have made to the Lord — the types of sacrifices described in the first reading in Sirach, of keeping the commandments, of spending our lives in works of charity, of avoiding injustice, of paying the tithe of our life in a spirit of joy, of giving to the Most High generously as he has given to us — will all seem like small sacrifices compared to what we gain.
- One area in which we should ponder how much we gain is in the area many of us can be tempted to mourn the most, in terms of our choice through chaste celibacy to forsake the Sacrament of Marriage and the family life that flows from it. In some ways, the Sacrifice asked of us is greater than the sacrifice of Abraham. He was asked to sacrifice his first-born legitimate son Isaac. We’ve been asked to sacrifice our first son, our first daughter and all our children. What will there be for us? I often ponder about God’s dialogue with Abraham when he looks up into the heaven and is asked to count the stars in the sky, for so would his descendants be. And the Book of Genesis tells us a few verses later, “then dusk came.” Abraham was counting the stars in broad daylight. He couldn’t see them, but he knew that the stars were there. Today the Lord promises us a hundred fold as spiritual fathers of his family. We may not see them, but they will be

there. The house that we give up is a trade for the eternal mansion. The family we forsake is to become a father of a family of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of spiritual sons and daughters, or even more. It is worth it.

- One saint who shows us how much it's worth it is the one we celebrate today. This year is the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Philip Neri and hence on his feast day this year (on the date of his birth into eternal life in 1595, not the date of his birth into this world, which is July 25) is a good time for us to focus on the fact that when he forsook a lucrative inheritance from his uncle, when he decided to leave the typical pursuits of the world to follow the Lord, he would never have guessed just how much the Lord would keep his promise: that throughout the world people so many spiritual sons and daughters would be celebrating his 500th birthday. Even the sweet Christ on earth, Pope Francis, wrote a letter about this feast day this morning.
- There would be many things we could ponder about his earthly life, how he responded in faith to the Lord's calling and how he received a 100-fold grace from the Lord in this life. But what I think would be most valuable on a retreat focused on the Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church that Pope Francis is trying to effectuate would be to look at St. Philip as a patron of the New Evangelization. In the 16th century he modeled for us what all of us ought to be doing in the 21st.
- When Philip Neri arrived in Rome in 1533 as an 18 year-old layman, the eternal city was in multiple levels of devastation. Most of the people were still in trauma from Charles V's brutal ransacking of the city in 1527. The Renaissance had led to the rediscovery of much of pagan literature and with it, the intellectual and cultured classes had readopted pagan rituals and practices. The Church was in almost total disarray. Several of the Renaissance popes lived more in disgrace than grace. Cardinals were appointed not because of their holiness or sacred leadership but because of their bank accounts and bloodlines. Many pastors, desiring to live leisurely, subcontracted the care of souls to those who were unfit. The challenges that confronted Philip would make the serious issues we face today — the residue of so much bloodshed, two world wars, the sexual revolution, a distorted notion of freedom, the redefinition of marriage — seem comparatively almost idyllic. Yet, by his death in 1595, this vast metropolis had, to a large degree, returned not just to the practice of the faith but to fervent practice of the faith.
- What did St. Philip do to help turn it around? What can we learn from him to help us in our task of re-evangelization today? Briefly I'd like to mention seven elements.
- The first is personal holiness. When Philip arrived in Rome, he got a job as a tutor of two young boys that provided a room as well as a daily fare of bread, water and few olives. Philip spent most of his time in prayer and study, trying to conform his heart to the Lord's. He begged God to give him what he needed. God didn't let him down. On the vigil of Pentecost in 1544, when he was 28, as he was in the catacombs imploring the Holy Spirit to give him the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), he saw the third person of the Trinity take on the appearance of a ball of fire that entered his mouth, descended to his heart and caused an explosion of heat and love that an autopsy later demonstrated had broken outward two of his ribs and almost doubled the size of his heart. St. Paul once wrote to the Romans, "The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us," and that was literally true for St. Philip. For the rest of his life, the fire burned both spiritually and physically, so that no matter how cold outside he needed to have the windows open. People could hear his heart beating across Churches. He became a living example of each of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-mastery. His docility to what God the Holy Spirit wanted to do in him and through him not only led to his becoming one of the greatest saints of all time but also to his helping vast multitudes respond to the sanctifying work of the same Holy Spirit. In the Collect beginning this Mass we begged for the same miraculous transformation: "O God, who never cease to bestow the glory of holiness on the faithful servants you raise up for yourself, graciously grant that the Holy Spirit may kindle in us that fire with which he wonderfully filled the heart of St. Philip Neri." We're asking for a heart transplant, so that we might live with a heart like St. Philip's. That's the heart of the new evangelization.
- The second element was cheerful friendship. Philip would go up to people on the streets, joke and laugh with them, win them over by his jovial goodness and ask, "Brothers, when are we going to start to do good?" Rather than preaching the Gospel at them, he was incarnating the joy of the good news for them, which inspired them to seek to do good alongside him. He planted a seed and let God do the watering. People

liked Philip, because he knew how to have a good time. He was the quintessential exemplar of proposing not imposing the faith on people, because he was supremely confident that the faith was a proposal few could really resist when they saw the joy of it lived out. He started with natural goodness and tried to draw people toward spiritual greatness. Pope Francis wrote this morning, in his letter for St. Philip's 500th anniversary of his birth, that the way he approached his neighbor, "witnessing to all the love and mercy of the Lord, can constitute a valid example for bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful. From his first years in Rome, he exercised an apostolate of personal relation and friendship, which is the privileged way to open others up to encounter Jesus and the Gospel. As his biographer attests, 'He approached this one and that one on the fly and soon everyone became his friends.' He loved spontaneity, he shunned phoniness and formality, he chose the funniest means to educate others in the Christian virtues while at the same time proposing a healthy discipline to help the will welcome Christ in the concrete aspects of one's life. His profound conviction was that the way of holiness is founded on the grace of an encounter with the Lord, accessible to everyone, of whatever state or condition, who welcomes Jesus with the amazement of children."

- The natural goodness that he evinced and called upon was the third element of his missionary paradigm. He invited his new friends to help him in caring for the sick. They would volunteer each day as orderlies in hospitals, cleaning and changing patients, feeding them, and often preparing them for death. Medical care and sanitation are still problems in Italian public hospitals today; they were little more than germ factories in the 16th century. Philip and his friends, however, brought the Good Samaritan's love to those whom few in society were willing to care for. And that started to transform all those who did it.
- The fourth element was what we'd call today adult education of the laity. Philip would get all his friends together for brief talks in his apartment on the lives of the saints and martyrs, on Church history, and on various applications of the faith to daily life. He would give many of the talks himself — which created a stir since he was at the time a layman — and invite others whom he thought capable to do the same. Later, these would develop into what he called the little Oratory, where everyone from the poor and illiterate to cardinals and Rome's rich, famous and cultured would sit side-by-side. He equipped people for the mission Christ had given them and showed the enthusiasm that we should have for the truths of the faith, for the way things really are. People are made for the truth and Philip acted on that knowledge. Pope Francis, in a letter he released this morning for St. Philip's feast day, wrote, "From his fervent experience of communion with the Lord Jesus the Oratory was born, characterized by an intense and joy-filled spiritual life of prayer, hearing and conversation about the Word of God, preparation to receive worthily the Sacraments, formation to the Christian life through the history of the Saints, the Church, and works of charity for the poorest of the poor."
- Fifth, he organized specifically Christian activities. You can't replace something with nothing, and Philip knew that to draw the young away from pagan practices like the Saturnalia, there needed to be fun and attractive adventures of faith. So he started pilgrimages to the seven ancient basilicas in Rome, 40 hour devotions, musical groups and more. Many who at first might not have been drawn to the activities were attracted to the contagious enthusiasm of their organizer. Over time, however, these good activities formed them in virtue as much as the pagan activities had been forming them in vice. These happy peregrinations were also the occasion for many others to come to know about Philip and to join them. The holy sites to which they journeyed, and the holy actions of prayer and picnic in which they would engage along the way, were the means he used to get ordinary people back on the way who is Jesus leading people to eternal life. He helped them to see that these sanctuaries were their spiritual patrimony, the saints were their brothers and sisters in the faith, and that the spiritual treasures were their family heirlooms. That began to change the way they looked at what so many took for granted.
- Sixth, after his spiritual director persuaded him that he could do even more good as a priest than he was doing as a layman, he was ordained at the age of 36, and from that point forward he began to be one of the greatest confessors and spiritual directors in the history of the Church. There's no greater means given by God to help people turn their lives around than the Sacrament of Penance. From dawn until his noon Mass, and for several hours in the afternoon, Philip would hear confessions. In order to hear more confessions, he needed to cut down on the advice given to each penitent, so he would ask them to come to the little Oratory where they could learn at once many of the things he would otherwise need to repeat. Many of his

medicinal penances remain legendary, like having a vain young man shave off half of his beard to grow in humility and an elderly spinster try to collect all the pillow feathers dropped from a tower to learn the irreparable damage done by gossip. Some great sinners, as well as popes and saints, became his regular penitents and directees. This shows that there's always a one-on-one dimension to the new evangelization, in accompanying people along the path of holiness, and Philip made that time. Pope Francis wrote this morning, "Philip was the guide of so many, announcing the Gospel and dispensing the Sacraments. In particular he dedicated himself with great passion to the ministry of Confession, until the evening of his last day on earth. His preoccupation was constantly to follow the spiritual growth of his disciples, accompanying them through the difficulties of life and opening them up to Christian hope. His mission as a "chiseler of souls" was helped by the singular attractiveness of his personality, distinguished by human warmth, joy, meekness, and sweetness, all of which found their origin in his ardent experience of Christ and in the action of the Holy Spirit who had enlarged his heart."

- Seventh, St. Philip inspired a missionary spirit among the laity. He formed lay men and women so that they could go out and evangelize others and transform culture and society. They would read together St. Francis Xavier's letters from India and resolve to make Rome their Indies and win it back for Christ. Philip knew that, without the laity, there was little chance priests and religious alone could turn around Rome. This novel approach of lay involvement would bring him to the attention and, for a time, discipline of the Inquisition. He was centuries ahead of his time. But it's the same thing for us. If we're going to turn around our culture, we need to focus on forming the people who are already coming so that they can go, with the Holy Spirit's power, out as salt, light and leaven to turn around the face of the earth.
- The source of St. Philip's great Christian and priestly zeal was the Mass, which he saw as the downpayment of the hundred fold and more than the Lord gave. So great was St. Philip's love for the Mass, so great was his penetration of the Mass, that whenever he began to think about it, he would go into ecstasy and even, some said, would levitate. His double-size heart would become like a hot-air balloon lifting him up toward God. For that reason, in preparation for Mass, he would have read to him joke or comic books to keep him from not entering into ecstatic prayer. Later on in life, when he was no longer able to celebrate public Masses, the server would extinguish the candles after the consecration of the Precious Blood and come back two hours later, light the candles, pull on Philip's chasuble and help him finish the Mass. Pope Francis focused on his love for the Jesus in the Eucharist in his letter this morning. He wrote, "In our day, especially in the world of the young who were so dear to St. Philip, there's a great need for persons who pray and know how to teach others to pray. With his 'extremely intense love for the Blessed Sacrament without which he couldn't live,' as the documents of his canonization said, he teaches us that the Eucharist celebrated, adored and lived is the source from which one can speak to the heart of others. Indeed, 'with Jesus Christ joy is ever born and reborn,' as I wrote at the beginning of *Evangelii Gaudium*." Philip was constantly going to Jesus in the Eucharist to find his joy and it was from there that Christ's joy radiated in all that Philip said and did.
- Is the priesthood worth it? What will we get from all that we've given up to follow the Lord? St. Philip received to the full what St. Thomas Aquinas once asked the Lord Jesus, who queried what he would like to receive in exchange for having written so well about him. "Nisi te, Domine," St. Thomas replied. I want "only you, Lord!" Jesus in the Eucharist is our portion and our cup. He is the 100 fold we receive here in this life and our communion with him is not only the source of faith-forming persecution but also eternal life. As we prepare to receive the One who came into the world so that his joy may be in us and our joy perfected, as we prepare to receive the same source of St. Philip's priestly cheerfulness, zeal and effectiveness, we ask Jesus at the same time as he comes to us to send the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we may have a heart like Philip's and go out to warm the hearts of the world.