

# And then what?...

Even today, everyone without exception asks this simple and realistic question. We only have one life, and it was given to us by God to live as administrators, not proprietors.



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**I** do not know how many readers of these reflections – perhaps intrigued by a title that leaves one wondering what kind of questions and answers it presents and presupposes – have seen the film on the life of St. Philip Neri, interpreted by the great and incomparable Gigi Proietti: *I Prefer Heaven*.

I have watched it at least thirty times in different languages and am not ashamed to say that I felt so deeply moved each time that I have encouraged everyone to watch it, especially those who have received from God the vocation to consecrated life or sacred ministry. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but I am convinced that it contains material for reflection and meditation for an entire course of spiritual exercises.

In some way, this Saint has always been present in my life and my Dominican vocation: from an early age, he frequented the Monastery of San Marco in Florence, which was marked a few decades previously by the presence and work of Friar Girolamo Savonarola; I made my novitiate in this monastery, and during this time I read some biographies of Neri, always sensing an affinity with

him, at the very least due to our common sense of humour!

The film puts this beautiful and touching prayer on the lips of Philip, summarizing his hopes, aspirations, toils and struggles: “O Lord, how can I make them comprehend that You are the sole source of joy and beauty? Without You, I am nothing: why did You choose me to do all these things? I am not worthy! Even though I love them, my greatest joy is to be with You, but, alas, I have time for everyone except for You!”

*“At that moment, what will I have amassed?”*

In any case, allow me to present here some scenes, including the one opening the second part of the film. Some boys that Fr. Philip had taken from the street and gathered in the Oratory to give them material and spiritual sustenance, are now grown up and gather in reunion to celebrate the birthday of their “father” who in a quaint manner reminds them that he has only gained one more year since the last birthday, and nothing more!

Around the table, everyone shares their recollections from the past and their plans for the future. Alexander, having converted, will leave for

the Indies with the Jesuits, which has always been one of Philip’s dreams. Camillus will serve the sick, for he has discerned that in so doing he will serve the Lord. Peter is about to graduate. And finally, Aurelius announces his decision to undertake an ecclesiastical career, although acknowledging that it will not be easy: “I want to be a bishop!”

Perceiving his proud tone of voice and undoubtedly misplaced intentions, Philip asks him seriously and intently:

— And then what?...

A little abashed, Aurelius responds that, having attained the first step, he might be able to get a Nunciature.

— Naturally! And then?... – Philip insists, in a fatherly, but insistent tone.

Under the illusion of having his support, the young man replies:

— Then... I might become a cardinal...

— Cardinal?!... And then what? Then Pope?

— Perhaps, yes... – Aurelius replies.

At this point, Philip, with a compassionate gaze, repeats the first question:

— And then?... And then?...

— Enough, Philip! Then... I will die – Aurelius responds, lowering his eyes.

Philip forthwith kindly reminds him of the purpose of life and paternally invites him to ask himself: “At that moment, what will I have amassed?”

***And he tossed the hat into the air...***

Unfortunately, Aurelius did not heed St. Philip’s appeal to reconsider the meaning of life, so as not to squander it on ephemeral and fleeting things. Instead, betraying the confidence of his master, he capitalized on his relationship with the saint to spy on his pastoral activities, which were very daring for those times, and to report them to the ecclesiastical authorities. As a “reward” they granted him what he had always wanted – he became a bishop in France!

At the end of the film, Aurelius reappears in sumptuous episcopal regalia, on the spacious grounds of his palace, surrounded by monsignors and administrators who furnish him with information on the solid economic growth of the diocese. And he, sad and pensive, writes a letter to Philip, in which he acknowledges that, despite having obtained all

of his desires, it seems to him that he has nothing.

Reconsidering his life, he finally admits that Philip was right; the most precious prize he had attained was the affection of a gypsy man whom Philip had required that he wash from head to foot – especially the feet! – and the smile of Philip who, although aware of his intentions and betrayal, always loved him as he did all his other “sons”.

It is also interesting to note that, shortly before presenting this intimate coming to consciousness of a man who realizes he has squandered his life, the film focuses on the meeting of Fr. Philip with Pope Clement VIII. The latter asks him what are the rules and objectives of his nascent community. With fear, but at the same time with serene assuredness, Philip responds by saying that since it suffices to have but few rules to be obeyed (ah, if only leaders would take this truth into account...), he had chosen just one – charity!

Deeply moved by the honesty and sanctity of Fr. Philip, the Pope wanted to make him a cardinal. “No one merits this more than you,” he said with emotion. But he who would be called the “second apostle of Rome” took from the Holy Father’s hands

the cardinal’s hat that was to be imposed upon him, and asked with holy mirth: “Your Holiness, I a cardinal? I prefer Heaven!!!” And he tossed the hat into the air.

***We have only one life***

And so... then what?

Even today, everyone, without exception, asks this simple and realistic question about the meaning of one’s own life, the only one given us by God, to live as administrators and not as proprietors.

Today as always, blind ambition, egoism and egocentrism lead and develop into diverse situations, which we should know how to recognize and unmask if we do not want to squander the life that was given to us. Let us never forget: we have only one life, and there is no additional time slated for this combat!

The obsession for power, for pursuing a “career” at any cost, even without the capacity for such, refusing to accept reality and pathologically disassociating oneself from it, striving after positions of authority and exercising the prerogatives coming from them with arrogant impunity are situations that we all witness daily. They appear at the moment of boarding a bus or during a medical appoint-



*Aurelius eventually realizes that despite having obtained all of his desires, it seems to him that he has nothing*

Screen capture of the film “I Prefer Heaven”

ment; in attempting to claim a personal right in a government office, or submitting a simple question or request, only to encounter someone at the other end who – breaking the most basic standards of politeness – does not even acknowledge receipt.

Disparagement, dishonesty, corruption, vulgarity, the lack of respect due each individual as a person, systematic lying, when not outright calumny, making promises impossible to keep and offering favours at election time, shamelessly deceiving the multitudes to get votes. These have seemingly become predictable and even natural modes of behaviour for interpersonal relations today, in every social ambit, bar none. This is serious and very dangerous.

As Pope Francis astutely observed in a recent address after the Via Sacra in the Coliseum, there has been a loss of “shame for having lost our shame” (30/3/2018). I will leave it up to the readers’ memory and intelligence to confront and analyse the context of this sacrosanct, albeit sad, truth.

***We will be judged  
on our love***

And so... then what?

Nevertheless, those who, like King David, believe that this only applies to others are mistaken: “You are the man” (2 Sm 12:7). How many opportunists do each one of us know or have known, who like Aurelius, will stop at nothing for the sake of their career?

They are people blinded by power and by success, who at times, obsessed with a mania of omnipotence, forget that they are finite creatures and that their own life is not fulfilled in being “served” by others or in “taking advantage” of institutions, but in discovering the authentic joy of putting oneself at the “service” of others, of the



Portrait of St. Philip Neri (19th century)  
Complesso di San Firenze,  
Florence (Italy)

*Our desire is that  
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is a gift of God*

good of institutions and, consequently, of people. They forget that one day we will be judged on the love present or not in our lives – on this, and nothing more.

And so... then what?

Our desire, transformed here into a prayer, is that this question come to the fore in the conscience of everyone, without exception, and that, like St. Philip, we may respond with generosity, knowing that everything is a gift of God. We must give ourselves to Him in return. Let us not act like Aurelius, who waited too long to discover that, having obtained all that he desired, he had lost what was most

important: that to which he was called to be as a son of God and brother of his neighbour.

However, Aurelius eventually realized that because he had focused too much on visible and earthly things, he ran the risk of not reaping eternal goods. His attitude enkindles hope for each one of us, even when we think it might be too late...

Aurelius’ awakening is nothing other than *conversion*, for which it is never too late as long as we live! The beautiful episode of Christ with the Good Thief recalls expressions of deep and passionate mercy. “Remember me when You come into your Kingdom,” he asked Him. And Jesus replied: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Lk 23:42-43).

***Let us not condemn ourselves  
to slavery***

In reading these lines, some will certainly imagine that these are just beautiful words and thoughts that a priest is obliged to transmit, but that reality is another thing altogether, even within the bosom of the Church. This may be so, but precisely for this reason, it is crucial that we be aware of the danger and, above all be convinced that this manner of wasting one’s own life – I repeat, the only one we have – is not worth it.

In the end, we will discover that we have failed and, above all, we will perceive that, in the name of power, success and the desire for omnipotence, we have in fact condemned ourselves to slavery, “for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pt 2:19).

Let us ask ourselves then in all sincerity, especially if we are making some choice in life, at this moment in which the present is fully within our grasp, as is not the case with the past and the future: “And then what?...” ✧