

Blessed Juvenal Ancina (1545-1604) was the only one of the beatified Oratorians who knew Saint Philip personally. Towards the end of his life, Juvenal was commanded by the Pope to accept the bishopric of Saluzzo, in northern Italy, where he died, soon after his arrival, the victim of poisoning.

Liturgical Feast Day is August 30

Giovan Giovenale (Juvenal) Ancina was born in 1545 in Fossano, a small town in Piedmont. His parents christened him Juvenal, not in honour of the Roman poet, but in honour of the local patron Saint whom they wished to thank for the recovery of their child who seemed to be dying at the time of birth. Saint Juvenal, the patron of Fossano, had been a physician, a priest, and a bishop; the child Juvenal was to be all these and a Blessed as well.



Since the Ancina family was well off, both Juvenal and his brother Giovan Matteo, who would also become a priest of the Oratory, could pursue higher education. For Juvenal this meant philosophy and medicine. He earned a doctorate in both fields; and he was appointed professor of medicine at the University of Turin when only twenty four years old.

In the early years of his manhood, Juvenal led the life of a devout layman. He saw his profession as a means for spreading the faith, by his attitude to his patients as well as by explicit instruction. He was devoted to the poor, often treating them without demanding payment; and he would spend much time in devising medicines that could be made from inexpensive materials. Realizing that the care of the soul is more important than the care of the body, Juvenal would always urge the sick to turn to a priest for spiritual healing before he would start treatment. For recreation, Juvenal would listen to music, compose Latin verse, and play chess. He belonged to a religious confraternity and studied theology on his own, although it seems that he must have had some association with the Augustinians.

Such was the life that Juvenal was leading when he went to a Requiem Mass at the Augustinian monastery. The words of the Dies Irae filled him with an overwhelming fear of judgment. On his way home the words of the prophet Zephaniah tormented him: 'The day of the Lord is near; the voice of the day of the Lord is bitter.' Although he had led an objectively blameless life, Juvenal realized that he could do more with the wonderful talents God had given him. That very day, he decided to give up what little of worldly vanity he indulged in and to devote himself to seeking the Will of God alone. He applied himself to prayer and spiritual reading to determine what God wanted of him.

In 1574, Juvenal was asked to accompany the ambassador of the Duke of Savoy to Rome as his personal physician. He arrived in the city the following year and found that he had plenty of free time. Juvenal decided to take advantage of the situation and began to study theology full time, under no less a master than Saint Robert Bellarmine.

Surprisingly enough, Juvenal had been in Rome for over a year before he visited the newly-established Congregation of the Oratory. Obviously taken by the Oratory, Juvenal started to attend the daily exercises. He wrote of this in one of the many letters he sent to his brother, Giovan Matteo:

For some days past I have taken up a new habit, for I have been frequenting in the afternoons the Oratory of San Giovanni de Fiorentini, where every day most beautiful spiritual discourses are delivered upon the Gospel, the virtues and vices, history, ecclesiastical history, and the lives of the Saints. Every day there are four or five who preach; and the audience includes bishops, prelates, and other distinguished men... Those who preach are persons well versed in theology, and of edifying lives, and of as great a spirituality as can be found in Rome. At their head is a certain Reverend Don Filippo, now an old man of sixty, but stupendous in many respects, and especially for his sanctity of life, his admirable prudence, and his ingenuity in devising and promoting spiritual exercises.

Juvenal also wrote that Philip had a great reputation for discerning religious vocations and that he would ask the Saint about joining the Carthusians as he and Giovan Matteo were planning to do. Both brothers were both greatly edified by a successful lawyer from Turin who gave up all to become a Carthusian and they determined to do the same. Saint Philip, however, dissuaded the brothers from carrying out this plan. Rather, after putting Juvenal off for some time in order to test his sincerity, he suggested the Oratory to them. They were both accepted as postulants on the first of October 1578.

Four years later, Juvenal was ordained. And four years after that, in 1586, he was sent to the new Oratory in Naples. During his stay in Rome, Juvenal put into practice the teachings of his holy superior. He loved to be unknown, taking upon himself hidden tasks. And he was always obedient, for in that virtue he saw the best antidote to pride and the best teacher of humility. In order to remain firmly rooted in his vocation and perhaps to remind himself of the powerful conversion he experienced during the Requiem Mass, Juvenal would meditate on the inevitability of death. He kept a skull in his room with the following lines written under it: O thou who lookest now on me, As thou art now, I once have been, As I am now thou soon wilt be. Think upon this and walk with God.

Juvenal spent ten years in Naples, leading a life that would have been singularly pleasing to Saint Philip, had the holy father gone to Naples to see for himself. Apart from his preaching, almsgiving, and spiritual direction, two activities stand out. Ever the doctor, and ever the son of Philip, Juvenal had great concern for the sick. He set up an association of Christian ladies to help alleviate the suffering in hospitals; and he insisted that the group have its weekly prayer meetings in the hospital lest it lose sight of its original purpose. Juvenal also put his talent for poetry to use. The Neapolitans had a passion for music. Unfortunately many beautiful melodies were debased by offensive lyrics. Juvenal took the most popular of these songs and wrote religious verses for them. He had them published; and soon many people were singing the melodies with the new words. The songs, it should be mentioned, were never made part of the liturgy. Juvenal did much also to make the liturgy more solemn and beautiful through sacred music.

After nearly ten years of an exemplary Oratorian life, Juvenal became troubled with a temptation to leave his vocation and become a Carthusian so as to be able to give more time to prayer. At the same time, however, he also had a great longing to do more apostolic work among the laity than the community life of the Oratory would allow. Since Saint Philip had died before this temptation arose, it became the task of Baronius and Tarugi to dissuade Juvenal from leaving the congregation. Their long letters could not convince him that it was God's Will that he remain an Oratorian; yet, they convinced him not to make a rash decision. The Roman fathers recalled Juvenal from Naples in 1596 to make up for the loss of Philip. Perhaps, too, they sought to stabilize his vocation. Once in Rome, Juvenal went to see the Pope about his desire to join the Carthusians. Clement VIII not only dissuaded him but outright forbade him to join the order; and Juvenal acquiesced in the decision.

In Rome, another situation arose which was most painful to Juvenal – the Pope seemed to want to make him a bishop. To an Oratorian this is most painful because it means leaving the community and having to accept something that Saint Philip clearly did not desire for himself or for his spiritual children. A Saint also fears this dignity because he understands the responsibility of the office and the many temptations to vain glory associated with it. Terrified of the dignity, Blessed Juvenal decided to flee from Rome. On 2 December 1597, he left the Oratory in the morning and did not return at night. Instead, he made his way north-east; and after wandering for some weeks, ended up at the Oratory in San Severino. Five months later, he was found, and received an imperative order to return to Rome. Juvenal obeyed; and, to his great delight, the danger of his being made a bishop had passed while he had been away.

Yet, Juvenal could not avoid the episcopate for ever. In 1602, the duke of Savoy asked the Pope to fill two vacant sees in his dominion. Clement VIII personally charged Juvenal to accept one of these. ‘It is time to obey’, he said, ‘and not to fly’. Thus, on the first of September 1602, Juvenal was consecrated bishop and given the diocese of Saluzzo, only 15 kilometers north of his native Fossano.

Although political troubles kept him from reaching the diocese until the spring of 1603 and death claimed him in 1604, Juvenal was able to restore discipline and to revive to a large extent the practice of the Catholic Faith in Saluzzo, which, being so close to Protestant Switzerland, was in particular danger of losing the Faith. In general, Juvenal tried to correct abuses by kind entreaties; but if these failed, he did not hesitate to exercise his authority. A friar in Saluzzo was having an affair with a nun. Rather than listen to the bishop's pleading, the friar was determined to continue in his sin. When it became obvious that Juvenal would use the full force of his authority to separate the two paramours, the friar sought an opportunity to kill him. At a great feast held in honour of Saint Bernard on August the twentieth, the friar put poison in Juvenal's wine. It took eleven days for the poison to do its work, days which Blessed Juvenal spent in agony. He was fully aware of what had happened, yet he forbade all around him to talk of poison and the wayward friar who had escaped. He finally died on August 31.

The words of Saint Francis de Sales best summarize the virtues of Blessed Juvenal. The two became friends in 1599 when Saint Francis was in Rome for a few months. They were appointed bishops on the same day. After Juvenal's death, Saint Francis wrote this testimony in favour of his beatification.

[Among all the distinguished and saintly men I met in Rome, and far beyond all these], the virtues of this great prelate shone conspicuous. I marvelled much to see, that to so great a learning he united so lowly an opinion of himself, to so much gravity of countenance and speech so pleasing and cheerful a demeanor, and to so lofty a mind so singular a sweetness and affability of manner. With him it was not as with the greater part of men, that high station and great acquirements brought with them pride and self-complacency; he did not exhibit his charity with learning, but rather his learning with charity. In fine, he cherished an ardent love of God and a tender charity for his neighbour, and in return he was truly dear to both God and man. We call that love sincere in which we cannot trace a single thought of self, and this exalted feeling is rarely found but in those who have well nigh reached the height of perfection.