

GOD'S HUMBLE SAINT

The year was 1836 and a young John Nepomucene Neumann, small in stature humble in nature but strong in spirit, journeyed from his native Bohemia for America. He left behind his country, loving parents, sisters and brother to travel alone to a strange new country. John carried little baggage or money. In fact, he walked most of the way to the port at Le Havre, France. Once there, he boarded a ship bound for New York. It would be a new world and life for John but he knew it was his destiny. What was John's "driving force"? God had called him to serve, he was answering the call and he placed his trust in God's hands.

John was born in 1811 in Prachatitz, Bohemia, known today as the Czech Republic. An academically gifted student with a great love of scriptures, interested in botany and astronomy, fluent in eight languages, he was persuaded by his devout mother to study theology. John was accepted and studied at Budweis Theological seminary and at Charles Ferdinand University at Prague. After completing his coursework in 1835, he looked forward to becoming a priest. Sadly, he learned the bishop of his diocese had ceased ordinations due to an over-abundance of priests.

Bitterly disappointed at not being ordained, John had read the writings of Bishop Frederic Baraga, a missionary from Slovenia, who worked with the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians in the Great Lakes Region in North America. He realized that America, as a young nation, needed priests. He wrote to bishops in America requesting ordination in their diocese and asking to be placed in a missionary assignment. His prayers were answered when Bishop John DuBois of the Diocese of New York favorably responded. After John's unannounced arrival in Manhattan, Bishop DuBois was delighted to have him since he had only 36 priests for 200,000 Catholics in New York and New Jersey. At 25 years of age, John received the Sacrament of Holy Orders in 1836 at the old St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and was sent to Buffalo. There the parish priest gave him the choice of being assigned to the city of Buffalo or to the difficult rural area. Father Neumann selected the rural area. Once there he worked with German immigrants in the scattered missionary churches throughout the Niagara Falls area. He built his own log cabin, slept and ate little and walked miles to visit farm after farm. Father Neumann also visited the sick, taught catechism and trained teachers to take over in his absence. He served as founding pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Williamsville, New York from 1836 until 1840.

In 1840, Father Neumann applied to join the Redemptorist Fathers, a society of missionary priests founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori in 1732 in Scala, Italy. He was accepted and entered the novitiate of the Congregation in Pittsburgh, PA, and became their first candidate in the new world. In 1842, he took his vows as a full member of the Congregation in Baltimore, MD. Father Neumann was given many difficult and complex assignments. He succeeded in his work since he used a simple and humble approach by speaking to immigrants in their native tongues and teaching them about their faith and God's love. After six years of difficult but fruitful work, he was appointed as the Provincial Superior for the

United States. Through his priestly duties, Father Neumann developed a strong bond for this young and growing nation and became a citizen of the United States in 1848.

Father Neumann never wanted or sought any position of authority. However, due to his devotion and love of God plus his humble, down-to-earth ability to work with people of all nationalities, he was appointed and consecrated in Baltimore as Bishop of Philadelphia in 1852. His accomplishments as Bishop were extraordinary. He was the first to not only organize a Catholic diocesan school system but increase the number of schools from two to one hundred. He also built new churches at the rate of one a month. Along with the above tasks, Bishop Neumann founded a religious community, The Sister of The Third Order of St. Francis of Philadelphia; saved the Oblate Sisters of Providence from dissolution and originated the Forty Hours Devotion for year-round prayer in all churches. Due to his selfless love, humility and devotion, he was affectionately known by the laity as "Our Little Bishop". His generosity and kindness were legion. In fact, one story circulated that Bishop Neumann was chastised by other bishops for looking "shabby". One bishop remarked that he could at least wear a "decent coat". He quickly replied that he had given it away to a person in greater need.

Along with his demanding diocesan tasks, Bishop Neumann wrote catechisms and articles for many Catholic newspaper and magazines. He was particularly endeared by German and Italian immigrant communities due to his command of their languages and his dedicated ministering. On one visit to a parish he was picked up in a manure wagon and he remarked, "Have you ever seen such an entourage for a bishop!"

During this period in our American history (1840's through 1850's), the Know Nothing Party, which was an anti-Catholic political group, was at its height of power and activity. The Know Nothings would willfully set fires to both convents and schools in protest. Despondent and discouraged over these assaults on Catholic institutions, Bishop Neumann wrote to Pope Pius IX in Rome asking to be replaced as bishop. The Pope quickly responded and insisted that he maintain his ecclesiastical office. Bishop Neumann obediently obeyed.

A special joyous chapter in Bishop Neumann's life was when he was called to Rome to be present in St. Peter's Basilica on December 8, 1854. At that time, Pope Pius IX solemnly defined "ex cathedra", the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Shortly after that memorable event, Bishop Neumann traveled to his boyhood home and had a joyous reunion with his family. Unknown to Bishop Neumann at the time, this would be the last visit with his family.

Bishop Neumann was a man who silently offered up mortifications and suffering to God. As his health began to fail, he once remarked that "A man must be ready; for death comes when and where God wills it." Never "giving in" to illness, he carried on with his busy schedule. On January 5, 1860, Bishop Neumann went on an errand and mailed a chalice to a pastor in a rural parish. Walking home, he suffered a massive stroke and collapsed at 13th and Vine Streets in Philadelphia. Forty-eight year-old Bishop Neumann died before a priest

or physician could arrive. As he requested, and to be with his fellow Redemptorists, his body was buried, unembalmed, in a wooden casket under the floor of St. Peter the Apostle Church.

In 1976, the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints recommended to Pope Paul VI that John Neumann be enrolled in the calendar of Saints of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope approved and signed the decree. The Church requires that a candidate for sainthood have two attested and proved miracles before beatification and two more approved miracles before the candidate is declared a saint. The first miracle was an eleven-year-old Italian girl from Italy cured of acute diffused peritonitis after praying to Bishop Neumann; the second miracle was in Philadelphia when a 19-year old boy was crushed between a car and a telephone pole and his injuries were diagnosed as fatal. After his parents placed Bishop Neumann's picture on top of their son, he made a complete recovery. A third miracle occurred when a young boy was diagnosed with bone cancer. His parents took him to the shrine of Bishop Neumann in St. Peter's Church. Prayers were offered and a relic applied to the cancer. The symptoms miraculously disappeared. After accepting these miracles as authentic, Pope Paul VI did not need a fourth miracle to declare Bishop Neumann a saint. On December 20, 1976, final word was given for Neumann's canonization.

It is interesting to note that when Bishop Neumann's remains were exhumed in 1902 for the purpose of the required inspections for sainthood, they found them intact. In 1962, 102 years after his death, the St. John Neumann shrine was constructed and his body again exhumed. It was then revested with a face mask placed over the skull and the body placed in a glass casket. Pope Paul VI canonized him as a saint on June 19, 1977. In 1989, more than 25 years after the body was placed in the glass casket, the archdiocese gave approval to renovate the shrine chapel and to restore and place new vestments on the remain of St. John Neumann. Today the shrine receives visitors from around the world who pray that the "Little Bishop" intercede for them. St. John's feast days are January 5th on the Roman calendar for the general church and March 5th in the Czech Republic.

"St. John Neumann, by the living power of your example and by the intercession of your prayers, help us today and forever!"

(This prayer was offered by Pope Paul VI during St. John Neumann's canonization homily.)

Essay on St. John Neumann by Betty Cianci