

*Letter to Commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the birth of
St. John Nepomucene Neumann*

March 28, 2011

Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R.

Dear Confreres, Sisters and Lay Associates,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ who calls us to preach the Gospel ever anew and sends us with joy to the most abandoned and the poor!

I write this letter to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of John Nepomucene Neumann. He was born on March 28, 1811 in Prachatitz, Bohemia. In his homily on the day of John Neumann's beatification, Paul VI summarized his life in a few significant words:

He was close to the sick, he was at home with the poor, he was a friend to sinners, and today he is the glory of all immigrants, and from the viewpoint of the Beatitudes, the symbol of Christian success.

I invite each of you to remember and celebrate during this year the gift God has given to the Church and to the Congregation in the life of this remarkable Redemptorist, *the glory of all immigrants*, in the context of the call from our last General Chapter.

The XXIV General Chapter challenged us to respond to the contemporary reality of the mass movement of peoples and to revise our apostolic priorities. As the XXIV General Chapter reflected on this in plenary session, our then Superior General, Fr. Joseph Tobin, commented that Redemptorists have an excellent and inspiring patron and model for pastoral ministry to migrants in St. John Neumann, who was himself an immigrant. He went to the United States precisely to work with and among immigrants.

John Neumann was keenly aware of his *missionary* vocation. He signed his first letters home "John Nep. Franz Neumann, Missionary". He inquired about and thought about a proposed Society of Missionaries, which never came to birth.

Once in the United States, he was fully at home with the abandoned and poor immigrants he encountered and gave himself totally to accompanying and serving them in love. He was aware of their needs and of their spiritual hunger. He knew from personal experience what it was like to be an immigrant in the United States: to arrive in New York harbour with no one to greet him on the docks, with no place to stay for the night and almost no money in his pocket. He did not even have the assurance that he would be welcomed by the Bishop and accepted for ordination! His experience mirrored the experience of countless other immigrants setting out toward the unknown, arriving unannounced and often unwelcome on foreign shores.

He had left his home country in February, 1836, and would only return nineteen years later. He missed his family and his home. Some of his letters show a great longing for news from Bohemia since communication was very difficult. After fifteen years in the United States, he wrote to his father in 1851 that "no day passes that I do not imagine myself with some longing to be in my father's home and in the midst of my dear relations and friends, still I have never regretted that I devoted myself to the Mission in America".

The reality of emigration and immigration today is certainly different from that of the time of John Neumann. But the missionary challenge is fundamentally the same. We learn several very important lessons from John Neumann that will throw light on our present situation.

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A life of missionary dedication is a call from God received through the abandoned and the poor. This call will be best understood and our response will be most authentic if we are close to those who call us. The seeds of this vocation may be sown while we are still at a distance. But the vocation itself will grow and mature as we live close to those to whom we are sent. Our vocation is both to evangelize and be evangelized by the poor. We continue to grow and learn as we walk with the poor. A life of missionary dedication calls us beyond our areas of comfort and opens new horizons, compelling us to face sacrifices and complex challenges.

A life of missionary dedication will not necessarily put us in the spotlight. It calls us to explore new avenues and ways of proclaiming the Gospel, often on the margins and fringes of society. The Redemptorist missionary is not only the effective and dynamic preacher in the pulpit! Redemptorist missionaries also work in alleys and slums, in rural settings and cities, wherever the abandoned and the poor are found.

Although John Neumann grew up in a German-speaking home and learned Czech during his studies, he knew that these languages would not be enough to prepare him for a missionary vocation. Even if he worked primarily with German-speaking immigrants, he knew he would need English and he believed French would be very helpful. He also learned Italian, impressed by the beauty of the language, and aware that it might prove useful for his missionary work.

John Neumann was aware that it would be helpful to have a broader cultural experience than the one his own country could provide him. This would prepare him for the cultural complexity of the United States, a nation of immigrants from many cultures. He felt the need for a larger world to expand his own perspectives and open him to a broader experience, a sharper outlook on life, in other words, a broader contemplative outlook. As the Congregation prepares for greater collaboration and restructuring that crosses the boundaries within a Conference and between Conferences, we ourselves will experience the challenges of language and communication as well as inter-cultural dynamics.

The last two General Chapters have stressed the importance of learning languages. Particular stress has been placed on Spanish, English and Italian for communication within the Congregation. The mission calls us to become fluent in the languages of the people among whom we serve. The goal is not simply to learn a language but to be able to “inculturate” our missionary dedication, to help us empty ourselves and “restructure” our lives prophetically for mission.

Formation – both initial and permanent – must take seriously the challenge of inter-cultural living and ministry. Pastoral experience outside our own culture, especially at some point during initial formation, is an important element of this process. Experience of languages and cultures requires a spirit of openness and freedom. This openness demands personal initiative and commitment as well as structured opportunities within the ongoing or continuing formation program.

On arrival in United States, John Neumann embraced the ministry entrusted to him by the Bishop of New York with apostolic zeal and generosity. Shortly after ordination, he was sent to the fringes of the Diocese and entrusted with the care of several parishes. The needs were great, and so were the pastoral demands and the distances to be traveled each week. John Neumann began to consider the benefits of belonging to a missionary community. He believed a missionary community could provide greater missionary effectiveness and also personal support. By 1839

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John Neumann had met the Redemptorist, Fr. Prost, and had begun to consider a vocation to the Congregation. In 1840, he left for the Redemptorist novitiate.

John Neumann had a keen sense of the intimate and mutual relationship between mission and community. His experience led him to a deep appreciation of the value of community commitments in mission, rather than individual projects – especially for the stability of the ministries. As Superior of the North American mission, he stressed this community dimension, and tried to establish good foundations on which the confreres could build together.

His experience of apostolic community was not without its struggles. Each Redemptorist community was “international” and “intercultural” in nature. The confreres came from a variety of European nations, languages and cultures. The first vocations in the United States came from diverse backgrounds. At times, there were personal difficulties, which on occasion led to confreres returning to Europe or leaving the Congregation.

He also experienced some of the struggles of growth, and changes in administrations in Europe. Responsibility for the Mission in the United States passed from Belgium to Austria before a North American Province was created in 1850. At times this led to conflicts of approach and mentality with the “Mother Province”.

John Neumann realized that structures and communities need to be renewed to ensure continuity and effective ministry. The confreres need conversion and renewal for the same reason. On January 30, 1850 he wrote in a letter to Francis Xavier Seelos:

Our great mistake is that we allow ourselves to be deceived by the spirit of worldly shrewdness, the desire for fame, and the love of comfort. We ought to fight the temptation to make spiritual things a means of temporal advancement. The principles of faith fade out of our hearts in proportion as we allow the principles of the world to come in. We place our confidence not in God but in our own intelligence and experience. This, my dear Father, in my opinion is the cause of all unhappiness.

As the Message from the XXIV General Chapter reminds us: “The more radical our conversion, the more radical and prophetic our *Vita apostolica*”. This conversion will move us from seeking personal or community comfort to accompanying the abandoned and the poor. Radical conversion broadens our perspective so that we can begin to see as God sees. To see as God sees mirrors the biblical role of the prophet, who then proclaims the vision. This contemplative outlook will move us to witness and action for the sake of the Reign of God, not only as individuals, but above all as a missionary community. In this way, we will incarnate more fully the theme for this sexennium: *to preach the Gospel ever anew: renewed hope, renewed hearts, renewed structures for mission.*

As one studies the life of St. John Neumann, it is impossible not to be impressed by his availability for mission. Even during his novitiate, he preached missions and was sent to different communities in response to pressing pastoral needs. As a confrere, Neumann made himself available to others for the sake of the mission. He was always ready to learn and to use whatever means were necessary so that he could preach the gospel anew.

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In his availability for mission, Redemptorists find a model for living the principles of restructuring adopted by the XXIV General Chapter:

Principle 2: "Restructuring for Mission should stimulate a reawakening of our Vita apostolica. It should prompt a new availability for mission." This availability for mission, so evident in the life of John Neumann, needs to be cultivated and promoted in our contemporary Apostolic Life as essential to our prophetic and missionary vocation.

Principle 3: "Restructuring for Mission should seek out and accompany the most abandoned, especially the poor." Missionary availability will call us to re-examine our apostolic priorities, always with pastoral concern for those who suffer because of the mass movement of peoples and human trafficking.

Like Neumann, we are called to learn to preach the gospel ever anew. The theme for this sexennium is inspired by a saying of St. Clement Hofbauer. It is important to remember that St. John Neumann's mission and ministry is in continuity with the spirit and example of St. Clement, even though they never met. Like both of them, we need to be open to new methods of evangelization, new experiences and new languages if we are going to interiorize the sexennial theme both personally and as apostolic communities. Above all, we need to make their spirit of missionary availability our own.

It is no surprise that only a year after his arrival in the United States, Neumann felt the need to evangelize the "Indians", the native population who often lived, not only in poverty, but also alienated from a North American society now dominated by European immigrants. The mass movement of peoples affected not only those who emigrated and the family and friends who remained behind. It also had a significant impact on native or aboriginal populations in the United States, much too often oppressing them and excluding them from the new society that was taking shape, encroaching on their territory, and impoverishing them. Neumann's pastoral ministry to immigrants opened his eyes to the native populations who had been displaced and were often living in poverty. His desire to serve peoples of many cultures extended beyond the different European cultures of the immigrants who were his first parishioners. It included all who experienced abandonment, marginalization and poverty. However, by 1840 Neumann came to believe that there was more urgent pastoral need among the immigrant population and thus opted for that mission.

John Neumann admired many of the principles on which the young democracy of the United States was founded. He also appreciated the opportunities open to poor immigrants, many of whom were fleeing oppression and poverty in their homelands. However, he realized that there were other elements at work in this society and he could not condone them. He had a number of battles with wealthy lay people regarding parishes, schools and properties. He also encountered the prejudice of citizens who had been part of earlier colonization and who now wanted to deny to new immigrants – especially Catholics – the rights and freedoms their ancestors had appreciated when they first arrived in North America.

The XXIV General Chapter reminded us that missionary conversion will call us to deepen our reflection on culture. "We are missionaries who come together from various cultures to form communities based on faith in Jesus Christ. This faith calls today's Redemptorist to esteem and embrace the cultures of others while at the same time recognizing cultural limitations and giving countercultural witness, where appropriate" (Decisions, 1.4).

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Regardless of age or origin, in today's world we need to enter into dialogue with peoples, cultures and traditions very different from our own. This challenges us, as it challenged John Neumann, to move out of our provincialism and parochialism, even when we are not sure where it will lead.

I would like to suggest some practical conclusions to honour the memory of St. John Neumann by incorporating dimensions of his spirit into practical decisions for the Congregation today.

In the spirit of missionary dedication of St. John Neumann, I urge every Conference and Unit to consider at least one concrete pastoral project to respond to the needs of those affected by the mass movement of peoples. Such a pastoral project could well be an ideal situation for an international community. Information about any such decisions and plans in the Conferences and in the Units should be sent to the General Government.

Provincial and Conference Secretariats of Formation should examine their programs of initial and ongoing formation to ensure that they include experience of different cultures, as well as formation in issues of culture and inter-culturality; language training, especially in Spanish, English and Italian, but also in other languages helpful and necessary for the mission; the study and integration of obedience and missionary dedication as key elements of our Redemptorist identity as proposed by Fr. Tobin in *A Letter to the Confreres* (September 8, 2009 – in *Analecta C.Ss.R. 2008-2009*, pp. 170-200 in English and pp. 201-233 in Spanish).

Some have said that John Neumann was a very ordinary man who did ordinary ministry very well. That may well be true. He did not draw attention to himself and he often he served in the background. His very ordinariness means that he is a confrere with whom most of us can easily relate. However, John Neumann did ordinary things with extraordinary love and extraordinary dedication. I think that this is what makes all the difference. Then and now.

In conclusion I would like to recall words from a letter by Fr. Joseph Tobin, written for the twenty-fifth anniversary of John Neumann's canonization (April 11, 2002):

In an age when spirituality is sometimes proposed as a strictly introspective journey into the self, Saint John reminds us that service of the poor and forgotten is a clear way to God. And, in the face of an ethos that urges us to consume and possess, the Saint advises us to travel light, suggesting that simplicity makes the pilgrimage of life more joyful.

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2011, may the example of his life inspire and encourage us all. Above all, may his spirit continue to find an echo in our spirit and renew our hope, our hearts and our structures so that we may continue to preach the Gospel ever anew!

Your brother in the Redeemer,

Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R.
Superior General

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