

FEAST DAY

A missionary with a heart for the Poor, Simplicity and Humility rooted in the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and in devotion to Mary.

The decade of 1860 would witness major shifts in the American identity. It was the time of the American Civil War. As the era began, on January 5th, a lesser known event also took place. A bishop, just five feet, nine inches tall who spoke with a German accent, had some business to see to with a lawyer; on the way to the office, the bishop wanted to stop by the local post office to check on a chalice needed by a poor, rural pastor to say Mass. It seemed to have been lost in the mail. The bishop, who described himself as “a sturdy mountain boy,” never completed his task that morning. He died on his way, on the steps of a local Protestant homeowner, without the surrounding prayers for the dying with which his confreres would have ushered him into heaven in more normal circumstances. That city was Philadelphia and its bishop’s death happened unannounced.

By the time of his death, this Bishop John Nepomucene Neumann had given almost twenty-fours of service in the ministry to the immigrants of the United States who escaped political and religious struggles in the Old World and sought a place of refuge in the new land. During these years, Catholics grew from an insignificant minority into the largest single denomination in the United States. Confused by their new surroundings and customs, and often separated further by language, the Church provided a place of security and comfort for the immigrant. “Language saves faith” was an expression used by those who worked with the immigrants, and Neumann did his part. Before he had sailed for America, he was conversant in German, Czech, French and English; but concern for the peoples he served in the U.S. compelled him to add Italian and Gaelic to the list of languages used to hear confessions and be with his flock.

From the time he was a seminarian, moved by the life of the Greatest of Missionaries, St Paul and his missionary Journey’s as well as the letters from Missionary priests working in the USA, John Neumann dreamed of being a missionary and so he set sail for the USA to be a missionary, eventually he joins a missionary order, the Redemptorists in the USA and gave himself totally to the mission of proclaiming God’s abundant love to the poor and the most abandoned, the immigrants in the USA of the 1800s. He is called today, the patron of immigrant people and especially immigrant children for whom he opened so many schools as Bishop so that they would have a good Catholic Education.

Simplicity and Humility

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. (Neumann’s letter to Francis Xavier Seelos, C.Ss.R., January 30, 1850)

Though released from his vow of poverty when Neumann was consecrated bishop, Neumann never abandoned his simplicity. He never owned extra clothing or shoes, and his house was devoid of ostentation. But perhaps more importantly, despite the expectations of his wealthy Philadelphia patrons and his fellow bishops, he continued to fulfil his pastoral duties, ministering to his poor rural parishioners and avoiding high society 'obligations'. He never sought to be a bishop, and he did not use his position for self-aggrandizement but died a poor servant of the children of God. Neumann was not known as the 'Little Bishop' simply because of his stature.

Rooted in Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament

The very core of the Life of a Redemptorist Missionary comes from his union with Jesus, the Redeemer most powerfully experienced in the Blessed Sacrament. It was this union that John Neumann experienced that brought him to carry the Lord in the holy sacrament to the people he ministered to as a young priest in the far-flung areas in upstate New York and then later as Bishop promoted the 40 hours devotion to the Blessed Sacrament all through his diocese of Philadelphia. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was the source of his energy and zeal for mission.

Devotion to the Mary

Hail! Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy! ... Unto us all give strength against our enemies and thine, courage to those that fear, joy to those that mourn, peace to the contrite of heart, and perseverance to the just. (Neumann's pastoral letter, The Feast of Saint Charles Borromeo, 1854)

In his devotion to the Blessed Mother, John Neumann was following in the footsteps of the great St. Alphonsus, founder of the Redemptorists and author of the famous work on Mary, *The Glories of Mary*. Neumann composed many prayers to the Blessed Mother, and most of his prayers to God and Jesus conclude with an appeal for Mary's intercession. Given such devotion to the Mother of God, Neumann was understandably eager to participate in the pope's proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

As we celebrate the feast of an amazing Redemptorist Bishop, I recall the words of Pope Benedict XV when he would declare John Neumann Venerable.

In the decree which declared John Neumann "Venerable," the pope declared: "We hasten to say that wonderful results can spring from simple deeds, provided these are performed as perfectly as possible and with unremitting constancy." In the end, to understand the heart of St. John Neumann, one must take him for what he was. Neumann was, indeed, an ordinary, good man who was true to his mission and used his talents well, even as he admitted and accepted his short-comings. His greatness is found precisely in this, in the fact that he was ordinary enough but he was ordinary in an very extraordinary way. Pope Benedict went on to explain: "The merits of an active man are measured not so much in the number of deeds performed, as in their thoroughness and stability. For true activity does not consist in mere noise; it is not the creature of a day, but it unfolds itself in the present, it is the fruit of the past and should be the good seeds of the future. Are not these very characteristics the mark of the activity of Venerable Neumann. ... All find in the new hero an example not difficult to imitate."

Before we pray together our prayer seeking the intercession of the 'Little Bishop' St. John Neumann, let us listen to his own words from this Diary addressed to God,

O my God! I thank you for the love you have planted in my heart. I will cultivate this precious flower. I will guard it night and day that nothing may injure it. O Lord, water it with your grace.
(Neumann's diary)