

Day One

The Life of St. John Neumann

Named after the fourteenth-century martyr Saint John Nepomuk, John Nepomucene Neumann was born on March 28, 1811, in Prachatitz, Bohemia, the third of six children in a well-to-do Roman Catholic family. At boarding school, Neumann was drawn to the natural sciences and determined to study medicine. But he was also accepted at the seminary at Budweis in 1831 and from that moment never gave another thought to any vocation except the priesthood.

In 1833 Neumann earned a spot in the provincial seminary in Prague and soon felt called to become a missionary in the U.S. He finished his studies in 1835, but because his bishop was not performing ordinations that year, Neumann decided not to wait, having heard that the bishop of Philadelphia wanted German-speaking priests to minister to the immigrants in his diocese. Neumann left home on February 8, 1836, but during his journey across Europe he learned that Philadelphia no longer needed him. Neumann took his savings and booked his passage to New York anyway.

Upon arriving, Neumann made his way to St. Nicholas Church on Second Street, where he discovered that the New York bishop needed German priests. Neumann was ordained subdeacon on June 19, deacon on June 24, and priest on June 25. Almost immediately, he was on board the steamer for Buffalo. His new parish there consisted of four hundred Roman Catholics, most from Germany, scattered across nice hundred square miles of mostly frontier areas. Neumann spent his days on horseback, ministering to his parishioners by travelling from Batavia to Niagara Falls to Buffalo to Erie. Under his leadership, the people built a number of churches, and he saw to the catechetical instruction of the children.

Despite his success, Neumann felt that he personally needed the direct spiritual guidance of a religious order. So in October 1840, he abandoned his parish and went to Pittsburgh to be inducted into the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, also known as the Redemptorists. But he was sent in rapid succession to parishes in Baltimore, New York, Rochester, Buffalo, and the Ohio territories before he was allowed to complete his novitiate in 1842. Then he was stationed at St. James Church in Baltimore, though he ranged as far York, Cumberland, and Richmond to minister to German settlers and to combat the rising tide of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States.

Neumann was sent back to Pittsburgh to finish building the Church of St. Philomena, and this led to his appointment as vice-provincial (superior) of the Redemptorists in the US in 1847. So he moved to St. Alphonsus Church in Baltimore, and during his tenure, he wrote catechisms for children and adults in German and English and moved the Redemptorist novitiate to Pittsburgh. He also sought US citizenship. When he was relieved as vice-provincial in 1851, he became rector of St. Alphonsus Church.

Without warning, in 1852, Pope Pius IX commanded the Redemptorists to accept Neumann's appointment as bishop of Philadelphia. He was consecrated bishop on Passion Sunday, March

28,1852, taking the words, '*Passion of Christ, strengthen me,*' as his Episcopal motto and becoming known as the 'Little Bishop'.

At the time, the Diocese of Philadelphia, the largest in the country, consisted of 170,000 Catholics scattered among 112 churches throughout the eastern half of Pennsylvania, the lower half of New Jersey, and all of Delaware. With only about 100 priests to serve this vast population, Neumann sought out those who felt abandoned by the Church. Consequently, he again travelled frequently. He also established a diocesan school system – the first in the country and the model for today's Catholic School system in the US – and opened a circulating library in Philadelphia. In the first three years of his tenure he established, on average, one new church per month. In April 1853, he held a diocesan synod, at which he preached his goal of having the Forty Hours Devotion of the Blessed Sacrament observed somewhere in the diocese on a continual basis. Despite the popularity of his programs and homilies, many people, including a number of other Bishops, considered Neumann unqualified for his office, particularly because he did not coddle the wealthy families of Philadelphia nor limit himself to administrative matters. As a result, Neumann suggested dividing the diocese (with himself taking the rural portion) or even resigning as bishop, but the pope would not entertain such ideas.

In fact, Pius IX invited Neumann to Rome for the December 8, 1854, declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Neumann took advantage of this trip to visit his father, whom he had not seen since 1836. And in 1855 he met ex-emperor Ferdinand, who made Neumann a member of the Austrian national society of Nepomucene Hereditat.

Back in Philadelphia, Neumann continued to establish new churches. Neumann also helped organize a convent of Sisters of St. Francis, who were devoted to nursing and teaching.

But the critics eventually prevailed upon the Vatican, and in 1857 James Wood was appointed coadjutor bishop. Wood expected Neumann to resign, but Neumann had no intention of retiring, though he again suggested dividing the diocese. Rome demurred. Neumann remained in full control, spending most of his time in pastoral work.

But the little Bishop's service came to an abrupt end, for on January 5, 1860, while on his usual rounds, he collapsed in the street and died. He was buried among his Redemptorist confreres at St. Peter's Church, as he had wished, and almost immediately people began visiting his tomb to offer prayers of petition. Word spread that he was working miracles, and in 1889 the bishop opened an investigation of Neumann's life and writings. In 1921 Pope Benedict XV declared that Neumann practiced all the Catholic virtues to a heroic degree. Pope Paul VI beatified Neumann on October 13, 1963, and canonised him on June 19, 1977. He was the first American man to be elevated to sainthood.