

intervened to save the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a congregation for African-American women, from dissolution.

On January 5, 1860 John Neumann died of a stroke while walking down a city street taking care of errands. After his death, people publicized his many hidden virtues and penances. This short, unassuming, often unpopular man who worked so hard for God was declared a saint on June 19, 1977. He was 48 years old at the time of his death. Bishop James Frederick Wood, who had been appointed his coadjutor with right of succession, took office as Bishop of Philadelphia.

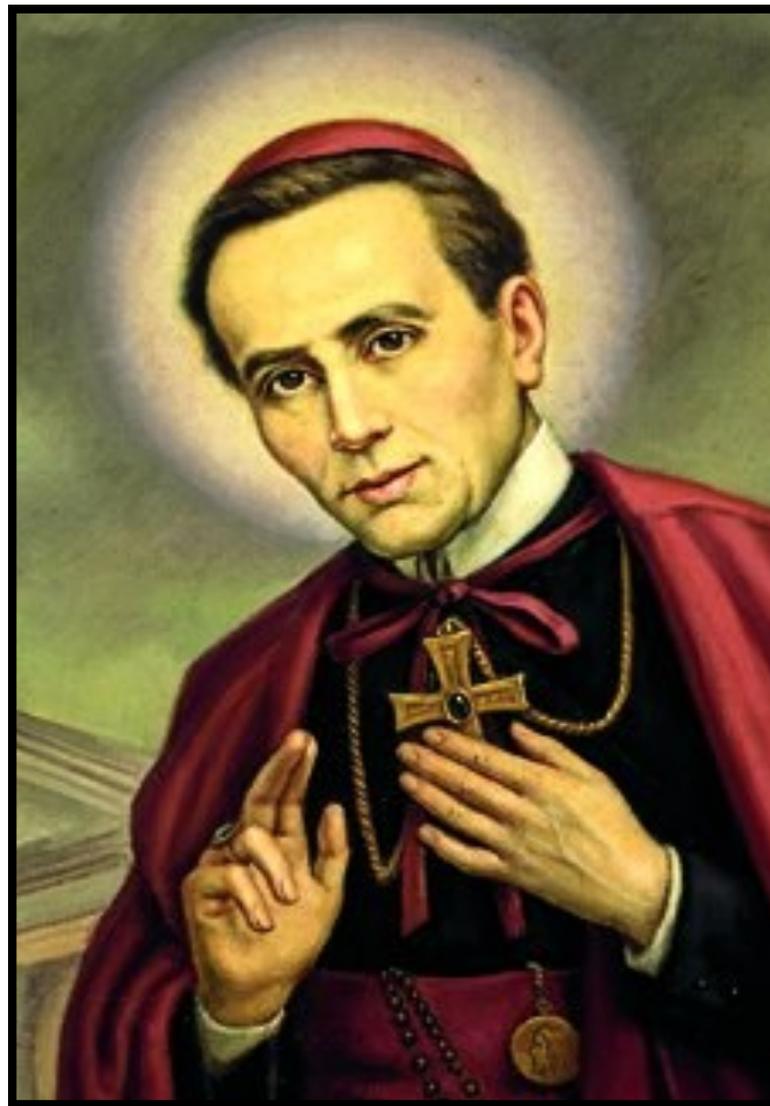
People called him the stubby priest and laughed when they saw him riding his horse, because his feet did not touch the stirrups. He was not very good-looking – a square face, a square body. He was quiet, not a man with a vivacious personality, not one to charm a crowd or draw attention to himself. He was not the type of Church leader who pleased influential people. But John Nepomucene Neumann was a man of God who also was true to himself and he did the best job he could do.

\*(excerpted from: [www.stjohnneumann.us](http://www.stjohnneumann.us); [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org))

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# Saint John Neumann

Feast Day January 5



**A tireless preacher of the Gospel  
to the most abandoned,  
especially the poor**

## Saint John Neumann

\*This American saint was born in Bohemia on March 28, 1811. He was looking forward to being ordained in 1835 when the bishop decided there would be no more ordinations. It is difficult for us to imagine now, but Bohemia was overstocked with priests. John wrote the bishops all over Europe but the story was the same everywhere no one wanted anymore priests. John was sure he was called to be a priest but all the doors to follow that vocation seemed to close in his face.

But John did not give up. He had learned English by working in a factory with English speaking workers so he wrote to the bishops in America. Finally, the Bishop in New York agreed to ordain him. In order to follow God's call to the priesthood John would have to leave his home forever and travel across the ocean to a new and rugged land.

In New York, John was one of thirty-six priests for two hundred thousand Catholics. John's parish in Western New York stretched from Lake Ontario to Pennsylvania. His congregation consisted of hard working German speaking people who were clearing the forests around Niagara Falls. He traveled on horseback from one mission station to another, visiting the sick, teaching catechism, and training teachers to take over when he left. He was busy with his many responsibilities, but very lonely at times. He felt the need for the fellowship of community life and for the spiritual challenge that living with other priests might bring.

So John entered the Redemptorists Order. As a novice, he was sent to different places so frequently that he wondered if his superiors really wanted him. Finally they allowed him to make his vows, and he became the first Redemptorists to be professed in the United States. He helped his parishes until he was made the superior of the American branch of the order. While John felt very unqualified in this position, it was due to his direction that the Redemptorists became leaders in the parochial school movement. He served as a parish priest in Baltimore until he was made Bishop of Philadelphia in 1852. There was great opposition to his appointment at that time.

The influential, wealthy Catholics wanted someone who would make a good impression: one who would speak eloquently and act the part of a refined, polite gentleman. They wanted a Bishop who would look the other way when he saw their unchristian practices. The Irish wanted a bishop who was Irish, who was one of their own kind. Those who were unhappy with John did not seem to care that he was a prayerful, sincere follower of Jesus. They dislike his thick Bohemian accent, plain speaking style, and the fact that he was very quiet and strict. He received a very cold reception when he went to Philadelphia. While it hurt him deeply, John decided that he would just be himself and do the best job he could. He knew that God would not ask any more than that. But his resolution did not make the criticism stop.

He also found himself confronted by the Know – Nothings, a powerful political group determined to deprive foreigners and Catholics of their civil rights. To achieve their goals, they burned convents and schools. Between the Catholic and the non-Catholic attacks, John became so discouraged that he wrote to Rome requesting to be transferred to a smaller diocese. He thought maybe someone else could do a better job in this position. But the highest Church authority in Rome (Pope Pius IX) told him to stay at his job – which he did! He stayed and contributed a great deal to Catholic education. In eight years, Philadelphia grew from two Catholic schools to one hundred schools, and was organized on a diocesan basis. Every year he made a visit to each parish and mission station, hoping to start a Catholic school in each place. He brought in many teaching orders of nuns and Christian brothers.

His facility with languages endeared him to the many new immigrant communities in the city. As well as ministering to newcomers in his native German, he also spoke Italian fluently and ministered personally to a growing congregation of Italian speakers in his private chapel. He eventually established the first Italian national parishes in the country for them. For the German immigrants, he published two catechisms and a Bible history in German. He wrote many articles for Catholic newspapers and magazines. The ability to learn languages that had brought him to America, also led him to learn Spanish, French, and Dutch, so that he could hear confessions in six different languages. When Irish immigration started, he learned Gaelic so well that one Irish woman remarked "isn't it grand that we have an Irish bishop!"

Neumann was notorious for his frugality. He kept and wore only one pair of boots throughout his residence in the United States. Once on a visit to Germany, he came back to the house he was staying in soaked by rain. When his host suggested he change his shoes, John remarked, "the only way I could change my shoes is by putting the left one on the right foot and the right one on the left foot. This is the only pair I own." When given the gift of new vestments, he would often use them to fit the newest ordained priest in the diocese.

In 1854, Neumann traveled to Rome and was present at St. Peter's Basilica on December 8, along with fifty-three Cardinals, hundred thirty-nine other bishops, and thousands of priests and laity, when Pope Pius IX solemnly defined, ex cathedra, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Neumann actively invited religious institutes to establish new houses within the diocese. In 1855, he supported the foundation of a congregation of religious sisters in the city, the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. He brought the School Sisters of Notre Dame from Germany to assist in religious instruction and staffing an orphanage. He also