

SAINT JOHN NEUMANN – JANUARY 5

“Too many priests...” How we would like to hear those words today. We regularly hear the opposite. But for Saint John Neumann, that was the response he received again and again as he petitioned various bishops in Europe to be accepted as a candidate for ordination.

John Neumann was born in modern-day Czech Republic in 1811 and entered seminary at the age of 20. In the midst of his studies, his bishop decided that there would be no more ordinations, as Bohemia already had more than its share of priests. Feeling strongly the call to the priesthood, and blessed to speak eight languages, he wrote to other bishops in Europe, all of whom already had too many priests.

Finding his desire for priestly ordination frustrated, he decided to write to bishops in America, and he found a more welcome response. He set out for the United States in 1836 and was soon serving as a missionary priest. He first served German immigrants in the Niagara Falls area, but after four years he found that another desire of his was not being fulfilled - the desire for communal life. Taking this an indication of a call to religious life, he applied to and entered the Redemptorists in Pittsburgh. In 1842 he took his vows in Baltimore. After only six years, he was appointed provincial superior of the order in the United States.

In 1852, Saint John was consecrated Bishop of Philadelphia. Among his many successes was the organization of a diocesan school system, the first of its kind in the country. During his time as bishop, the number of schools increased from one to two hundred. He also published two catechisms and a German-language Bible history. However, his time as bishop was not all easy; he knew his share of difficulty. The Know Nothings were a constant thorn in his side, burning down many convents and schools. He unsuccessfully begged for another bishop to take his place, but generously continued his service until his death of a stroke in 1860.

It seems that Saint John’s life was marked by unfulfilled desires which the Lord eventually fulfilled in His Providence. Every person is called to make a gift of himself in love and feels this desire in his heart. As the Theology of the Body teaches us, our very bodies proclaim this truth: “The human body [is] oriented from within by the ‘sincere gift’ of the person” (TOB 15:4). Saint John knew in his heart that the particular way he was called to fulfill this natural desire was as a priest. The Lord had created him to make a gift of himself in celibate love for the Church. At every turn it seemed he was rejected, but he persevered until he discovered God’s will in America.

Then, he perceived another universal desire - the desire for communion. Whether or not it is perceived, this desire is present in every human heart, and it is present there because we have been created in God’s image and likeness. “[We] can deduce that *man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons*, which man and woman form from the very beginning.... [This] constitutes, perhaps, the deepest theological aspect of everything one can say about man” (TOB 9:3). Again, Saint John knew in his heart that this desire could be fulfilled for him only in a religious community. This was the Father’s particular will for his life. Once again exercising patience and perseverance, he was received into the Redemptorists and lived the evangelical counsels through the vows of religious life.

Saint John Neumann teaches us priests to be ever aware of our need to give ourselves away in love and to find communion with God and others. We must be careful that these natural desires never get squelched by the busyness of priestly life, for happiness is the fruit not of successful programs and projects but of our response to these deep desires of the heart. A consistent life of prayer, as well as genuinely intimate relationships with others, will keep these desires fresh in our hearts and will help us to find the fulfillment of those desires in our fidelity to the expectations the Church puts upon us as her priests.



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